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Strawberry Panic

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lightnovel



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ST. MIATOR GIRLS' ACADEMY



An anime-style illustration of two young girls in school uniforms. The girl in the foreground has long, vibrant red hair with a small green bow and a large, expressive smile. She is wearing a dark grey or black one-piece uniform with a white lace collar and cuffs, and a green patterned tie. She is holding a brown leather briefcase. Behind her, a girl with long, dark blue hair is also smiling and holding a similar brown leather briefcase. They are standing on a stone path in front of a building with yellow walls and brown window frames. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting a hillside setting.

*May today be
another good day.*

Of the three girls' schools built on the hill, St. Miator Girls' Academy, with its lovely, old-fashioned one-piece uniform, is the school with the longest legacy. It has strict educational standards and is attended by many girls from distinguished families. On any given morning, students can be seen going to school with their friends.



ST. SPICA GIRLS' INSTITUTE



*Let's have a party in the
courtyard this weekend.*



Many of the girls who attend St. Spica Girls' Institute are independent and active in society. Even students relaxing on the school's café terrace have an air of cheerful activity. The white miniskirt uniform is stylish and popular in the surrounding neighborhoods.

*Heh heh heh.
Are you
studying
hard?*



ST. LULIM GIRLS' SCHOOL



The girls who go to St. Lulim Girls' School always seem to be having fun, even when studying together in the classroom. The school's motto is "Nurturing modern wives and wise mothers." Maybe because of the school's independent and relaxed atmosphere, they seem to have a laid-back attitude when it comes to studying.

Lovers Drawn to Each Other

The *Étoile* competition is held to find the best couple out of the three Astraea schools. We will introduce the favored lovely couples of this contest: Nagisa and Shizuma, and Hikari and Amare.

Hanazono Shizuma

St. Miator Girls' Academy
Sixth Year; Snow Class

Hanazono Shizuma

Eldest daughter of a prominent Japanese family. Those around her are enchanted by her beauty and flamboyance. Though she was the *Étoile* last year, she is paired with Nagisa this year to claim the crown for the second time.



St. Miator Girls' Academy
Fourth Year; Moon Class

Aoi Nagisa

A newly transferred Fourth Year Student to St. Miator Girls' Academy. She has been Shizuma's object of desire since her first day at school, and before she could even acclimate herself in this prestigious all-girl school, she was pulled into the *Étoile* Competition.

Aoi Nagisa

Precious Friends



St. Miator Girls' Academy - Fourth Year; Moon Class
Suzumi Tamao

Nagisa's classmate and roommate who has a crush on Nagisa.

St. Miator Girls' Academy - First Year; Flower Class

Tsukidate Chiyo

An underclassman who adores Nagisa. A well-mannered and modest young lady.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year; Class Un

Nanto Yaya

Hikari's classmate and roommate. Strongly desires Hikari.

St. Spica Girls' Institute - First Year; Class Deux

Okuwaka Tsubomi

Surefooted Student Council Secretary. Always full of energy.



St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year; Class B

Hyuga Kizuna

Innocent girl who loves sweets and Chikaru-sama.

St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year; Class B

Natsume Remon

Kizuna's classmate and member of Chikaru's Costume Club.



St. Lulim Girls' School - First Year; Class C

Byakudan Kagome

Childish and always carries a teddy bear.

Konohana Hikari

St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year; Class Un

Konohana Hikari

A quiet, timid girl, newly transferred to Spica. She and Amāne, the campus star, are in love with each other.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Fifth Year; Class Trois

Otori Amane

The leader of the "Five Great Stars" of the school, and called the "Prince." She entered the *Étoile* Competition with Hikari to fulfill the expectations of the fellow students.

Otori Amane

*St. Miator Girls' Academy's
Student Council President*

Rokujo Miyuki

Fifth Year, Flower Class. Daughter of an old, well-established family. A strategist, known as the "Princess of Rokujo-in." Rumored to have the ability to control evil spirits.



Rokujo Miyuki

*St. Spica Girls' Institute's
Student Council President*

Tomori Shion

Fifth Year Spica student known as the "Snow Queen." Very intelligent, but unlike her nickname, can become quite heated at times.



Tomori Shion

*St. Lulim Girls' School's
Student Council President*

Minamoto Chikaru

St. Lulim Girls' School Fifth Year, Class A. Has a graceful demeanor, but is a definite go-getter. Known as the "Shadow Empress"...



Minamoto Chikaru

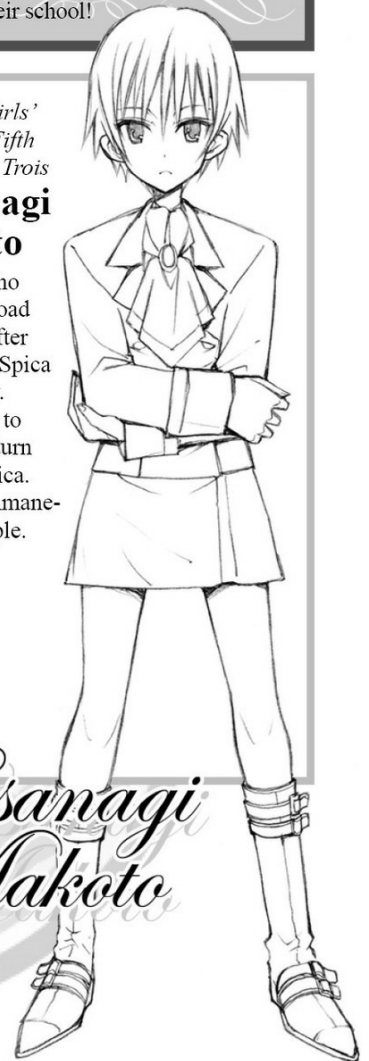
The Beautiful Campus Leaders

Here we will introduce the student council presidents who bring together all three schools. They are highly respected and admired model students gifted with both intelligence and beauty. Each beautiful campus leader strives to have their chosen couple claim the *Etoile* crown for their school!

*St. Spica Girls'
Institute - Fifth
Year; Class Trois*

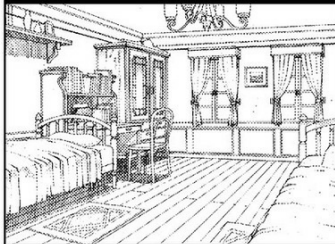
Kusanagi Makoto

Violinist who studied abroad in Russia after graduating Spica Elementary. Came back to Japan to return glory to Spica. Hates the Amane-Hikari couple.



Kusanagi Makoto

Astraea Hall (Strawberry Dorms)



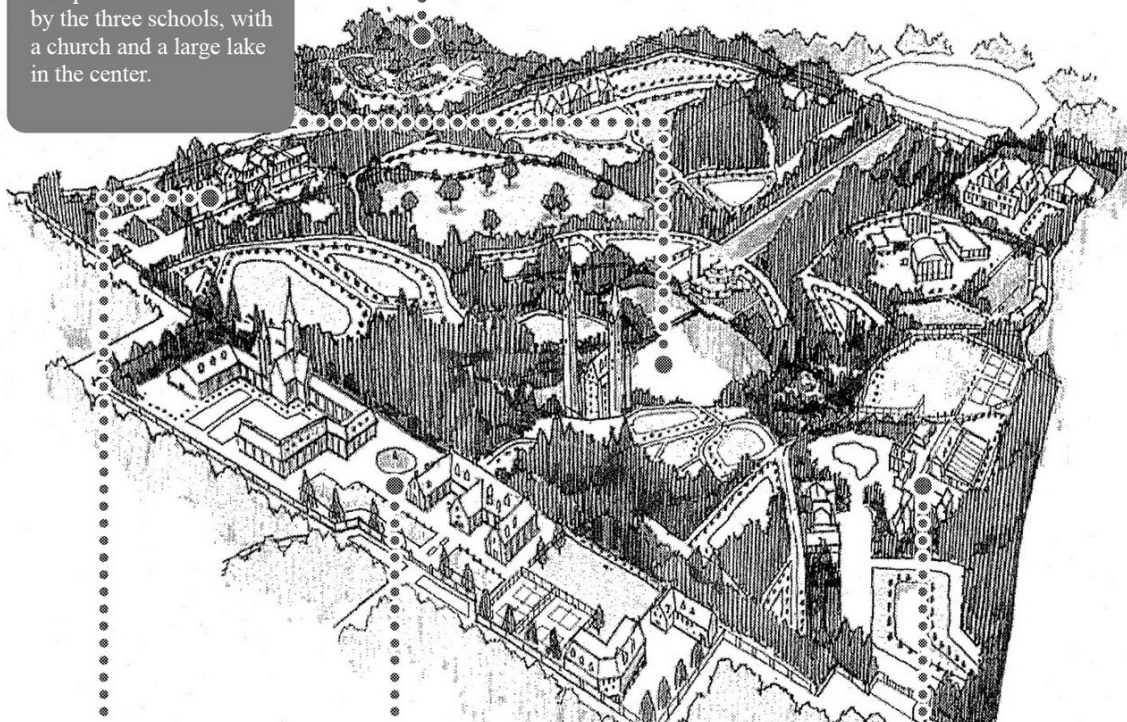
The dorm where Nagisa, Shizuma, and others live. Three buildings, one for each school, are arranged in a triangle.

Diagram of Astraea Hill

Here we introduce the facilities and other locations where the blessed young ladies enjoy their campus life. On Astraea Hill, there are the three all-girl schools, a dormitory, a garden, and a convent, which are isolated from the world.

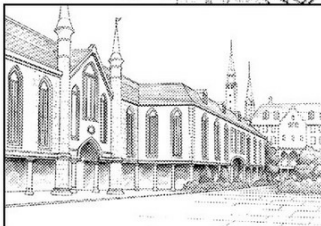
Maiden Park

The park is surrounded by the three schools, with a church and a large lake in the center.



St. Lulim Girls' School

A free, relaxed school with many interesting clubs. The building has a homey air to it and sits closest to the Strawberry Dorms.



St. Miator Girls' Academy

The oldest school, with its British architecture, has the strictest educational standards.



St. Spica Girls' Institute

This school emphasizes the development of women who will advance in society. Well-built facilities with horseback riding grounds and an indoor pool.

STRAWBERRY PANIC VOLUME 1

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Strawberry Panic

VOLUME 1

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SEVEN SEAS' COMMITMENT TO TRANSLATION AUTHENTICITY

JAPANESE NAME ORDER

To ensure maximum authenticity in Seven Seas' translation of *Strawberry Panic: Volume 1*, all character names have been kept in their original Japanese name order with family name first and given name second. For copyright reasons, creator names appear in standard English name order.

HONORIFICS

In addition to preserving the original Japanese name order, Seven Seas is committed to ensuring that honorifics—polite speech that indicates a person's status or relationship towards another individual—are retained within this book. Politeness is an integral facet of Japanese culture and we believe that maintaining honorifics in our translations helps bring out the same character nuances as seen in the original work.

The following are some of the more common honorifics you may come across while reading this and other books:

-san– The most common of all honorifics, it is an all-purpose suffix that can be used in any situation where politeness is expected. Generally seen as the equivalent to Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., *etc.*

-sama– This suffix is one level higher than “-san” and is used to confer great respect upon an individual.

-kun– This suffix is commonly used at the end of boys' names to express either familiarity or endearment. It can also be used when addressing someone younger than oneself or of a lower status.

-chan– Another common honorific. This suffix is mainly used to express endearment towards girls, but can also be used when referring to little boys or even pets. Couples are also known to use the term between one another

to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy.

Senpai– This title is used towards one’s senior or “superior” in a particular group or organization. “Senpai” is most often used in a school setting, where underclassmen refer to upperclassmen as “senpai,” though it is also commonly said by employees when addressing fellow employees who hold seniority in the workplace. (Note: “Sempai” is sometimes used as an alternate spelling.)

Kouhai– This is the exact opposite of “senpai,” and is used to refer to underclassmen in school, junior employees at the workplace, *etc.*

Sensei– Literally meaning “one who has come before,” this title is used for teachers, doctors, or masters of any profession or art.

Oniisan– This title literally means “big brother.” First and foremost, it is used by younger siblings towards older male siblings. It can be used by itself or attached to a person’s name as a suffix (-niisan). It is often used by a younger person toward an older person unrelated by blood, in this case as a sign of respect. Other forms include the informal “oniichan” and the more respectful “oniisama.”

Oneesan– This title is the opposite of “Oniisan” and means “big sister.” Other forms include the informal “oneechan” and the more respectful “oneesama.”

French Guide *Aînée*: Older sister *Cadette*: Younger sister *Étoile*: Star *Examen sur l'Astraea*: Exam about Astraea *Galette*: A type of crêpe, a pancake-like pastry *Garçon*: Waiter *Le Dernier Miracle*: The final miracle *L'Épreuve d'amour*: The test of love *L'Ouverture brillante*: The brilliant overture (beginning) *Petite couronne*: Small crown *Trois Lumières*: Three lights

Chapter 1

A Goddess Finds Delightful Prey

in the Cherry-Colored Mist

*F*lutter flutter...

All around them, cherry blossoms scattered to the ground. In the middle of a cherry-colored mist, a larger figure and a smaller figure stood close together atop a hill, surrounded by thick, old cherry trees. Standing atop the gently rolling hill of bright green, the two figures looked like they were floating in a thin, cherry-colored cloud.

“The time has finally come to say goodbye, hasn’t it?”

“Onesama, I...still...”

Fwooo. A gentle breeze blew. It scattered the cherry blossoms again.

Flutter flutter...

“I still want to stay with you, Onesama.”

The larger figure leaned toward the smaller figure in admonishment. She gently pressed her finger to the other’s lips. “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

The smaller figure—the younger girl—wiped at her tears with a handkerchief. “Y-you’re right... I’m sorry...” She’d been crying so much the handkerchief was already soaked, but she didn’t care. In a daze, she rubbed her eyes with it.

The larger figure reached out her hand and softly, gently, halted the other girl’s hand.

Twitch. The smaller girl’s shoulders shook horribly.

“You shouldn’t rub your eyes so much,” the older girl said. “You’re just as

much of a crybaby as ever, aren't you? Your eyes will get puffy." She lovingly, gently traced the girl's eyelids with her finger.

The young girl shook so violently, she almost seemed to convulse.

Fwoooo. A cherry-colored cloud enveloped them again. A halo-like aura surrounded them—mostly white, but with a single, faint drop of peach.

The older girl gazed at the younger. The school uniform suited her well, which made it seem even more like the time for her to transform into a grown woman had arrived. She felt an intense longing. *Ah, I can't take it any more.* She opened both arms wide and went to embrace the smaller figure, but suddenly she stopped herself. *I shouldn't. If I did...there would be regrets. I shouldn't hold her any more. It's time for us to say goodbye.*

She forced her arms under control, and instead of around the girl, gently placed them on her shoulders.

"Listen, my darling little daisy. The two of us have been so happy until now, right? You were my darling angel. Really. Please understand, okay? I adore you so much, it's really hard for ME to be apart, too. Goodbye."

At that last, the girl's face snapped up. Her stream of tears stopped without a sound, her face as sad as it could be. Her onesama, who was so beautiful, so sublime, she almost seemed to melt into the cherry-colored cloud that floated in the blue sky, slowly and silently shook her head.

Then her onesama gave a casual smile. "You know the kind of person I am, right?"

"Y-yes..." The girl knew, but still...it was only to be expected. A new flood of tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Come on, don't cry like that any more." Once again, the older girl gently wiped them away with her finger.

Nothing but sobbing came from the younger girl; she was choked by tears.

"What am I going to do? When I see you crying like that, it feels like it'll make me sad, too," said the girl's onesama—seventeen-year-old Hanazono Shizuma—her hands resting gently on the girl's back. In her own way, she

was mourning the fact she had to part with the innocent girl.

Ah, you are my treasure, as beautiful as a delicate daisy. I wish this moment could last forever and ever. The flow of time is cruel. In the end, it's come to this again: We have to part. I thought for sure you would be the one who could tie down my wandering heart.

As Shizuma looked at the high, clear blue sky, her thoughts drifted back in time.

I wonder how many times something like this has happened since I came to St. Miator.

St. Miator Girls' Academy was known all over the world as a first-class girls' school. It accommodated the kind of refined girls who seemed to have all but disappeared from ordinary society—well brought up, beautiful in appearance and very wise, yet with noble hearts. Shy and innocent, they had respect for their elders and pure hearts filled with love for God.

It's hopeless trying to tell me not to let my eyes wander.

Shizuma had attended this school since kindergarten, and since the day she'd entered middle school had attracted the attention of the entire school.

Even in a school like Miator, which was filled with girls from prominent families, being the eldest daughter of the head of such a large, well-established business conglomerate with so many ties to prominent political and economic circles was enough to get the other students' attention. On top of that, Shizuma was, with no exaggeration, a handsome, talented girl who excelled both academically and athletically.

She had long, shiny, gently waving hair and pale, almost transparent skin, like porcelain. She was tall, with long, slender legs.

Shizuma was on the track team, specializing in the high jump. During the sports festival, she competed in the relay. And in the national practice exam, she was always in the top one hundred. Her high-bridged nose and sharp chin gave her a look of intelligence, her large eyes, fringed by long eyelashes, always shone and she brimmed with confidence. Anyone who saw her

thought she looked like a bisque doll.

Smart, beautiful, athletic and talented—ever since she was a little girl, people had told her she was like a rose blossom.

Upperclassmen showered her with invitations to tea and underclassmen shot her admiring glances. It happened so often she didn't even feel uncomfortable about it. Shizuma never turned down those invitations—no matter who did the asking, she always answered with a smile. It was all a part of her glorious school life. Even if the other girls' admiration grew and turned into love, Shizuma didn't think it particularly strange. She enjoyed being surrounded by a bunch of sweet, beautiful damsels, and she certainly didn't dislike playing at romance when she was invited somewhere.

Sometimes Shizuma would fall in love—a mysterious feeling that only appeared when she was with her damsels, during the little games she would play with them. That thick, sweet, gentle, peach-like aroma that only floated in the air between two girls; an emotion that went beyond simple affection or impatience and made them wish they could touch each other's soft white skin forever.

Once this emotion had been born in her heart, it shifted intensely, and she found herself driven to control her partner.

I'm not going to leave your side for an instant. I want to be connected to you forever. You're so precious to me I won't let you lay eyes on anyone but me.

Blessed with talent and usually able to control everything, it was the first time in Shizuma's life she felt emotions she couldn't control, like an unruly, galloping horse. At some point, Shizuma had abandoned herself to the sensation.

Once she became an upperclassman, Shizuma started to change her "favorite" frequently. She thought she might have become numb to the feeling altogether. No, she knew that wasn't it. At what point had it started to fall apart? No matter whom she was with or what she did, it always came down to the same thing.

Deep in her heart, there was a void she just couldn't fill.

It could be because of *her*... For a moment, small cracks formed in Shizuma's heart. Whenever memories of that autumn began to surface, Shizuma pushed them down and sealed them away.

She had a feeling that somewhere out there, there must be someone who could fill that void.

Shizuma was silent.

The girl noticed the quiet, and before she even realized it, lifted her head. There were no more tears in her eyes. In their place was a determined expression.

"I'm sorry, Shizuma-oneesama. I cried in front of you even though I know you hate it when people cry." Her cheeks were soaked with tears, but somehow she managed to smile.

"Shizuma-oneesama, to me you are like a beautiful dream. Like what I feel when I look at these cherry blossoms." As she pointed toward the sky, a single fluttering cherry-blossom petal came to rest on the girl's fingertip. "I will be okay. Please, do not worry yourself. Just having the honor of being a companion to someone like you was a dream come true for me, Shizuma-oneesama. Thank you for letting me live my dream—I feel as if I could die happy right now."

The girl gently kissed the flower petal and smiled. "I've been so happy, this month that I've spent with you, Shizuma-oneesama. That's enough for me. I'm so happy—almost happier than someone like me has a right to be." Her voice shook toward the end of the little speech. *Fwooo*. The wind was cold against her tear-soaked cheeks.

"Thank you. You're such a good girl." Shizuma couldn't hold herself back. *One last time*. She took the girl's wet cheeks gently in her hands and gazed steadily at her face. The image of Shizuma's face reflected in the girl's damp, dark eyes grew larger and larger. Soon the only thing reflected was Shizuma's eyes. The other girl slowly closed hers.

The two figures floating in the cherry-colored cloud became one.

Rustle.

Before long, the rustling of Shizuma's skirt could be heard.

"Please, go before me, Oneesama."

Shizuma gazed at the girl's face worriedly. With her hands folded in front of her chest, the girl closed her eyes and accepted Shizuma's scrutiny.

"I would like to stay here a little longer and look at the cherry blossoms. I will use them to help me remember my dear Shizuma-oneesama." She slowly opened her eyes and gave a bright smile. "This is our final goodbye. But please do not worry, Shizuma-oneesama. Starting tomorrow, I will go back to being a regular underclassman. It's just, at the end, I wanted to—" A single tear fell from the girl's eyes. "My memories...the memories in my heart...even if I lose everything else, I will always carry them with me. You don't mind that, do you? I will treasure this for my entire life."

Feeling a slight twinge of pain in her chest, Shizuma smiled at her. "Yes, of course."

Then she turned her back on the girl and, without a single glance back, left her on the hill alone.

"My beloved, you will always be my one and only little daisy."

Swssshh. The breeze grew stronger and the snowstorm of cherry blossoms veiled Shizuma from the girl's sight as she walked away.

The sight of scattering cherry blossoms made everything there seem more beautiful.

They would only last but a week.

Sparkle sparkle.

Along the fence by the pale, dry path, clusters of white double bridal wreath¹ flowers blew about. The sunlight pierced through them, making them appear to shine.

"Woow, what cute flowers!" As the girl shouted for joy, she reached out

an impulsive hand to one of the young double bridal wreath bushes planted along the long fence.

The flowered branches, touched by the girl's delicate fingers, seemed to flutter happily as they scattered their small petals, which gathered on the ground by her feet.

"It's like a warm snow is falling."

Swssshhh. A small whirl of wind stirred.

Rustle rustle rustle...

The double bridal wreath branches, bent with the weight of countless small white flowers, swayed in the breeze.

A shining white petal snow fell on the ground all around. The girl had no idea the adorable flowers had an equally pleasant name, but it was a bright, beautiful sight.

The girl, Aoi Nagisa, who was already in a cheerful mood, walking to her new school, felt it was a very good omen. She had a feeling a lot of fun things waited for her. She'd heard the school was for really high-class girls, so she was a little nervous, but...

Yeah, I'm sure it'll be all right.

Gorgeous weather, a cheerful mood—that's what a new semester is all about.

Her brand-new school uniform, which she'd tried on for the first time this morning, was very cute, but also kind of mature. She'd thought it might not look good on her. Now those worries were a distant memory, because the uniform looked great on her.

Right?

That morning, when Nagisa had stood in front of the full-length mirror to see how she looked in her new uniform, the image that had looked back at her appeared to be a completely different person.

Her ponytail was tied more securely than usual; the brightly-colored bundle of hair that fanned out behind her was pulled up too tightly—probably because she'd put too much energy into tying it up.

The charcoal gray one-piece dress, made out of thin, high-quality wool, with an off-white petticoat that peeked from under the long button-down skirt, had a classic style. The delicate lace collar and the short tie in the school's color, dark green, gave it a formal look. Nagisa's growth had begun to spurt only about six months ago, but when she put on the uniform, she unexpectedly found she looked almost mature.

My face looks childish for a fifteen-year-old, and I can't do anything about that, but at least my usual cheerful smile is as perfect as ever today, if I do say so myself!

She tried smiling at herself in the mirror—and saw a smile that was still innocent and childlike. A smile that looked like it belonged to a child that knew only the taste of sugary-sweet candy and nothing of heart-wrenching love.

People are always telling me I look like a child, but... Umm, I wonder if it's because of these big, round, droopy eyes?!

Nagisa put a finger on the corner of each eye and tried lifting them up a little. *Whoa, that looks weird!*

She burst into laughter, but she had a feeling the uniform really looked better on her than she thought.

I guess it's true after all—when you enter high school, you grow up before you even realize it. Ha ha! Nagisa, aren't you being just a little cheeky?

Even though no one else was around, Nagisa smiled embarrassedly at the mirror.

Right. I feel like I can do anything today, Nagisa thought as she watched the wild dance of the double bridal wreath flowers shining in the sunlight. Her first time wearing the uniform, her first time going to this school—from now on, Nagisa would be going to a school for really high-class girls. She might

not quite fit in there, but still...

These adorable flowers came out to greet me! It must mean the girls at school won't hate me. How should I put it...a gift from God?

The weather was gorgeous this morning, the sun shone down on her, the little white flowers were so beautiful and adorable—and she didn't know why, but for some reason, she was in an amazingly cheerful mood.

Nagisa didn't know much about God, but she had a feeling that such a wonderful day as this was a gift from God to cheer her on. It felt as if He were telling her, "Do your best! If you make a little mistake or slip up a little, I will help you. So don't worry about the little things; just do the very best you can."

Yeah, that must be it! Today's the day I start out. God must be cheering me on! I have a feeling good things are going to happen!

Gently stroking the delicate white lace collar, Nagisa flung herself into an energetic spin. Her long skirt puffed out like a parachute. Flustered, she pressed it down again.

Oh no! Someone will see my underwear! I don't have time to be playing around like this—I'll be in big trouble if I'm late! Today's the first day of school and it's important. I went through all the trouble of getting up early, but I was so nervous after checking my uniform I had to drink cup after cup of tea to calm down, and now I only have ten minutes left! I have to hurry.

When Nagisa had put on the uniform she'd so longed for, she had taken a step forward in her life. It was the uniform of the venerable St. Miator Girls' Academy, which every single girl desperately wanted to attend.

The petticoat fluttered and floated in time to Nagisa's bouncy steps. She looked at the hem of her skirt dancing in the air—until she'd stepped into this uniform, Nagisa had never worn such a long skirt before—and thought, *I guess I have to walk a little more lady-like from now on.*

That is how Nagisa started on her way to St. Miator Girls' Academy on the day that marked the beginning of her school life.

When Shizuma reached the bottom of the hill, she looked back toward the top.

Astraea Hill. A convent, established here a long time ago, had served as the mother institution for St. Miator Girls' Academy since the school was built.

Two sister schools, St. Spica Girls' Institute and St. Lulim Girls' School, had since been built in the adjacent area. The three Astraea Schools, each with its own unique characteristics, were widely known throughout society as elite girls' schools. Teeming with the lush green of springtime, the hill rose out of the ground as if it wanted to pierce the high, blue sky.

Shizuma gazed up the hill. *Will she be able to go home alone? I hope she's not crying any more, but... No, I'm sure she's not.*

She shook her head. The fact that her relationships never lasted more than a month, no matter what girl she went out with, was entirely her own fault. She simply didn't have the ability to worry about the girl who was probably crying over her. Even Shizuma couldn't say exactly what the root of the problem was. Though she loved each one of them...the passion never lasted long.

It would have been simple enough to keep the relationship going even though the passion had disappeared, but she didn't want to do that. She didn't want to betray the other girl's honest feelings. She didn't want to hurt her.

Shizuma always wanted to love her partner as much as her partner loved her.

As she thought about all of this, a sharp pain ran through her chest again. *I don't want to hurt her. I want to love my partner just as much as she loves me. But what about her?*

Somewhere in Shizuma's heart, the question burned.

Yes, what about her? What about the girl I treated like that and had to leave... Could it be I feel guilty? Or could it be...I'm getting too old for this?

Shizuma forced herself to laugh, trying to fool herself into thinking it was a ridiculous idea. Suddenly her skin felt a little cooler.

Is this what they mean by crazy weather in spring? The wind seems like it's gotten stronger.

The white violets that bloomed on Astraea Hill bent in the wind.

I have to hurry back to the Strawberry Dorms. With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Shizuma went around the hill and walked along a path that headed in the opposite direction.

Rustle... She walked defiantly into the wind, which occasionally gusted at her. On the other side of the hill was the unconventional dorm Shizuma lived in.

I hope no one finds out I've broken up with her, at least for a little while...

Normally Shizuma would go directly to the salon. Since it was the last day of spring break, it was sure to be filled with students enjoying tea and snacks. A huge crowd of Shizuma's fans, who paid careful attention to her every move, would be there.

So Shizuma's absence today most likely had not gone unnoticed.

Because the schools and dorms both had strict rules regarding relationships between upper-and underclassmen, and Shizuma was going to be in the highest grade beginning this spring, it was rare for an underclassman to get close to her. An appearance by Shizuma at the salon was one of the few opportunities the underclassmen had to see her. It was almost like getting to meet a star.

Even though they knew all Shizuma's recent relationships had lasted only a month, there was still no end to the number of girls who admired her and wanted to be by her side. This was because all the girls Shizuma had loved said it had made them happier than anything else. It made them cry tears of joy, and they all said it was a memory they would put away in the most important place in their hearts for the rest of their lives.

And Shizuma used her overwhelming presence to reign over the other girls. There were many who would have loved to throw themselves into Shizuma's embrace and be held by Shizuma's long arms. She was more dignified than any man, smart, forceful yet beautiful...and endlessly greedy,

the kind of girl who tried to control her partner.

This was Shizuma, the girl they all longed for.

I hope the girl I just broke up with doesn't get hurt by any gossip going around the salon.

Shizuma's feelings turned a little dark. With a sigh, she looked at her feet; she had stopped without even realizing it.

A girl's voice called out ahead of her. "Excuse me! Is this the way to the Strawberry Dorms?"



When Shizuma looked up, she saw a girl wearing a St. Miator uniform, carrying a big Boston bag. Shizuma didn't recognize her.

"Who might you be?"

"I'm a fourth-year transfer student! I'm going to start living in the dormitory today."

Shizuma took another good look at her. *Heh heh. She has a cute ponytail. Well, well, it looks like we're getting another super-cheerful girl to add to the crowd.*

Lured by the girl's bright, sunny smile, Shizuma found herself grinning.

Ah, if I go back to the Strawberry Dorms with this girl, maybe it will distract them from starting any other rumors about me. Because once everyone gets this new bit of news, they'll just have to jump on it.

Shizuma was more than a little relieved. "I'd be happy to lead you there. Please, come with me."

Shizuma gracefully extended her beautiful white hand, as if leading a dance.

Chapter 2

The Shining Star of the Campus Makes a Decision in the Flaming Greenery

As the end of the day's classes drew near, a gloriously uninhibited atmosphere floated over the entire campus. In the Fourth Year Moon Class' homeroom, in the new school building, the final class was being held.

The nun, wearing a dark gray habit and a warm smile, looked over the classroom from the podium. "That is all. I pray for the safety of every one of you as you return home. Class is over. Take care, everyone. The organ, if you please."

A small organ sat close to the door of the classroom. Two students wearing St. Miator uniforms were seated in front of the instrument. According to the daily routine of St. Miator Girls' Academy, it was time for hymns. In both morning and afternoon homeroom the students sang hymns in thanks and praise to God.

In response to the nun's smile, the two students gave a small nod. They looked at each other, exchanged gentle smiles, and raised their hands above the keyboard. At that signal, the entire class rose quietly from their seats and the sound of a prelude began. The girls' beautiful, pure singing filled the room.

In Heaven up above

The stars of the sky

Give off

Their brilliant light.

Wow! Singing hymns is cool after all!

Nagisa loudly flipped though the pages of her hymnal. *But I don't know this*

song. I wonder what page it's on? There are so many hymns I just don't know what to do!

Rustle rustle rustle. Nagisa frantically searched the pages of the book. Since she hadn't been at the school very long, she didn't know where to find this particular song they were singing in the thick hymn book.

Found it! Found it! This is it. I see, it's a song for the Virgin Mary.

Nagisa finally joined the others. She came in late and she didn't know the song, but she sang proudly, without holding anything back.

Oh no! The girl in the next seat cast a long glance at Nagisa. *Oh dear. What am I going to do with you, Nagisa-chan. You let yourself get all frantic again. You look so serious. How cute!*

Suzumi Tamao, fifteen years old. This was her first spring in high school, but her fourth year at Miator. She was tall for her age, and Miator's classic uniform suited her well. Her head looked small, perhaps because she wore her long hair tied up, but it did expose the beautiful, gentle slope of her neck. Fascinating, elegant wisps of hair that escaped the tie caught the sunlight that came through the windows and shone, black with just a tinge of blue. She was a very beautiful girl, who looked much more composed and much more mature than her actual age.

Whenever Tamao saw Nagisa, she almost felt compelled to tease her. It was a sickness that had begun the day Nagisa had transferred to the school.

It's like they've let a sinful child in here. I finally begin to enjoy a peaceful school life, but now it's just like I'm... Well, like I'm a pervert!

A pervert—

As soon as that word popped into her head, Tamao froze for a moment, startled. *N-no, that's not it at all. That couldn't possibly be. What am I thinking?*

She shook her head a little. *Phew...* Mentally, she took a deep sigh. She had to think of something to lift her spirits... She put on a vague smile and shook her head in total resignation.

Tap tap tap. She gently tapped Nagisa's shoulder and whispered, "Hey, Nagisa-chan, listen to this! It looks like Shizuma-oneesama is outside."

"Whaaaat?" Nagisa turned frantically and looked out the classroom window, almost toppling her chair in the process.

Several nearby students looked at her, still singing.

Flustered, Nagisa ducked her head and cast a questioning glance toward the nun at the podium before looking back toward the window. The only thing she could see outside was the top of a large double-flowered cherry tree in full bloom.

A single, heavy-looking flower fell with a *plop*. Now that Nagisa thought about it, they were on the second floor.

"Jeez! Don't do that to me, Tamao-chan!!" With her face bright red, Nagisa posed as if she were going to punch Tamao and playfully tapped her chest.

In her heart, Tamao was tickled she could be so close to Nagisa, but on her face was an exaggerated frown. *Aah, Nagisa-chan really IS cute!*

"Excuse me."

The classroom door quietly opened. A calm, penetrating voice caused the atmosphere in the classroom to suddenly change. Nagisa's classmates, who would barely move even if someone made a huge sound, all turned at once.

Standing in the doorway was a tremendously beautiful woman—so stunning, it was as if she reflected the beauty of the flowers that fluttered outside.

"Shi-Shizuma-senpai—" Nagisa called out.

Remembering then what Shizuma had told her, she corrected herself. "Shizuma-oneesama!"

It had happened one week ago, on Nagisa's memorable first day at school.

When Nagisa saw Shizuma's delicate white hand stretched out toward her in the midst of a shower of cherry blossoms, she didn't know what to do

with it. Dumbfounded, she froze stiff.

Huh? Why does she have her hand out like that? C-could it be she wants to hold hands?! Uh, sh-she said "come with me," so she's probably going to show me the way, but why hold hands? I could understand if I was in elementary school or something, but, umm, I'm in my first year of high school, so... I know people tell me I look young, but I don't look like an elementary school kid, do I?! I can't just stand here like this forever, umm, umm...

When the panicked Nagisa stole a timid glance at Shizuma, she saw the other still standing there, not moving. She looked like she was kind and gentle, yet strong, with a noble smile that made Nagisa want to get closer to her.

As if she couldn't care less about Nagisa being shocked speechless, Shizuma simply stood there beautifully in the blowing wind, her outstretched arm not moving.

She just kindly kept it stretched toward Nagisa, her long hair swirling beautifully around her.

Nagisa looked at Shizuma's hand, patiently waiting for her, and...

Clench. Nagisa took it with both hands and squeezed with all her might.

Abruptly.

Suddenly.

Rudely.

Squeeeeeeze. Nagisa's cheeks were bright red with nervousness. Even through the tight grip, the softness of Nagisa's palm was instantly apparent to Shizuma.

Shizuma was shocked at both her rudeness and the strong warmth of her hands.

I've never had anyone squeeze my hand with such genuine strength. My cute little flowers always take my hand so softly and timidly, like they're touching something that might break.

On the other hand, feeling the slenderness and coolness of Shizuma's hand, Nagisa was hit with a sudden panic. *Oh NO, I can't believe it. What did I*

do that for? Why did I just squeeze her hand like that? I thought how weird it was to hold someone's hand, then I thought how stupid I looked just standing there, THEN I thought how pretty she was, THEN I thought, "She doesn't want to hold my hand, does she?" and then I thought, "I wonder why she's still standing absolutely still?" and then, and then, I just couldn't take it any more

—

—Aah, what'll I do? I must have scared her!

—Aah, I wonder what happened? I feel like my body's gotten so warm.

The two of them lifted their gazes from their clenched hands to each other's faces.

Ahh...

A sort of electricity ran through their bodies.

"It's Shizuma-oneesama!"

"It's Shizuma-oneesama..."

"I wonder what in the world would bring her to a fourth-year classroom?"

In the midst of the whispering of golden voices, Shizuma slowly bowed to the nun and gave her a gorgeous smile as she spoke.

"I apologize for interrupting your homeroom, Sister. I have come to get the student who is in charge of the holy water today."

Sighs of admiration rose from the class. The girls looked like they were about to faint.

"Aaah... What a perfect, beautiful bow she made."

"I could watch her all day."

"I actually got to see Shizuma-oneesama. This is the luckiest day of my life!"

"Oh, why thank you," the nun said politely. "You are Hanazono-san, correct? Your duties must be hard today." With a cheerful grin, she turned the pages of the attendance book. "The student in charge of the holy water

today is—oh my, it's our transfer student, Aoi-san!"

Nagisa and Tamao stopped their playful punches in mid-air.

Whaaaa...? M-ME?! Nagisa was so shocked she almost stopped breathing.

All eyes in the classroom were on Nagisa.

Oh, great. I feel like they're staring daggers at me...

"Well then, please come here, Aoi-san." With an air of calm, Shizuma walked slowly toward Nagisa. She stopped and reached out her hand to Nagisa and gave her a powerful look that said plainly, "Please take my hand."

"Go on, hurry."

When Nagisa timidly brushed her fingertips, Shizuma immediately clenched her hand and pulled the girl toward her.

Nagisa lost her balance and fell right into Shizuma's chest. A tiny scream rose from the back of the classroom. Wrapped in Shizuma's arms, Nagisa remembered. That day. Shizuma's large, strong-willed, almond-shaped eyes. Nagisa's round, childlike, innocent ones reflected in Shizuma's.

It was the same a week ago. Enveloped in a cherry-colored mist, the eyes of the two girls met. Neither of them saw their surroundings. Their eyes were wide open, but they gazed only at each other, as if they were trying to take in every last bit of each other's faces. They gazed at each other soundlessly, as if everything were suddenly in slow motion—and they simply gazed at each other.

The words Shizuma said next echoed in Nagisa's ears.

"From this day forward, you are my younger sister. Call me Shizuma-oneesama. If you break your promise..." *Sting!* Shizuma nipped Nagisa's finger.

"I'll punish you."

Shizuma released Nagisa's finger from her mouth. It glistened with

dampness.

The spring breeze brushed coolly across it.

Nagisa felt like she could still feel that coolness on her finger, even now. Just as Nagisa was about to get lost in the memory...

“I will lead you.” Shizuma’s cool voice echoed through the classroom. For just a moment, she gave Nagisa a strong embrace. With a satisfied smile on her face, she led the blushing Nagisa out of the classroom with an arm around her shoulder.

Clatter. The closing of the heavy door echoed through the room. A second later, the classroom was thrown into commotion.

Oh, Shizuma-oneesama... Sting. Seeing Nagisa taken away right in front of her, Tamao was so frustrated she ground her teeth.

Around the same time...

“I wonder what Nagisa-oneesama is doing right about now.” The words were only a faint mutter on the girl’s lips. The girl was Tsukidate Chiyo, twelve years old. She was in the First Year Flower Class’ homeroom at St. Miator. Her pitch-black hair was cut in a shoulder-length bob. The innocent, impressionable girl was also genuinely upper-class. She had gone to the same kindergarten as Shizuma, and was now attending Miator.

With homeroom over, the class had begun cleaning up. Chiyo paused in her sweeping and looked outside the window at the double-flowered cherry tree, remembering. Remembering the day she’d met Nagisa. The day she had decided Nagisa was her oneesama...

It had been about a week ago—the day the Strawberry Dorms had opened for the year. Even now, she could see it clearly. The cherry blossoms had been fluttering that day, too. But it hadn’t been a double-flowered cherry tree, which she found beautiful but somehow cheap-looking. No, it had been a Yoshino cherry tree, light pink and as delicate as a thin, ephemeral cloud.

Shizuma-oneesama had been there, beautiful and gentle, like a cherry-blossom spirit. Chiyo was captivated by the memory. Before she even noticed, she started shuffling her feet. She was fidgety for some reason.

Tomorrow is Easter... I don't really know why, but I get the feeling something wonderful is going to happen.

A voice coming from the hallway interrupted Chiyo's thoughts. "Chiyo-maru! It's time for the library committee meeting!"

"Okay! I'll be right there!"

"Wow! Look, it's Shizuma-oneesama!"

"How do you do, Shizuma-sama?"

"Shizuma-oneesama, you look as beautiful as ever."

The comments came from all around her. Cheers echoed around the red-carpeted hallway. A ring of blushing girls, their heads bowed reverently, opened up in front of her like a ripple.

"It's all right, it's all right, please don't go to so much trouble, my cute little daisies."

Shizuma was entirely unmoved by the girls' cheers and reverence. She simply kept walking and waving her hand with a grin on her face, looking like a queen, giving her subjects a royal smile. The cheering grew, like a bubble ready to burst on the water's surface.

Watching Shizuma act so much like a queen, Nagisa couldn't help blushing. *Shizuma-oneesama might be even more amazing than I thought.*

Shizuma strode majestically down the hallway with a huge smile, as she always did. But she noticed that Nagisa, walking next to her, hung her head. She dipped her own head and peeked into Nagisa's face.

"Oh dear. Whatever is the matter, Nagisa-chan?" Shizuma's long hair billowed and waved and the fragrance of flowers blossomed around her.

"It's nothing."

The smile Shizuma gave Nagisa was so beautiful it almost made her catch her breath. She looked even more like a majestic goddess than before. Flustered, Nagisa shook her head. Nagisa started to get the feeling someone like her shouldn't be next to someone like Shizuma. She was completely unsure of herself.

Shizuma enjoyed the expression on Nagisa's face. She tried hard to suppress her naturally flirtatious expression. "Oh Nagisa-chan, don't sulk!" She placed a hand under Nagisa's chin and forced her head up so she could gaze into her eyes.

There was more than ten centimeters' difference in their heights. Shizuma had to bend down to peek into Nagisa's face. As Shizuma watched, Nagisa's big round eyes started clouding with tears.

What beautiful, adorable eyes.

Quiver quiver.

Devoted, adorable, just like a little puppy.

Quiver quiver.

Aah, I can't take it any more.

Shizuma's face moved closer to Nagisa's, as if pulled in by some force.

Smooch. Shizuma planted a kiss on Nagisa's forehead.

Screams rose from the crowd of girls that surrounded them.



“Aaugggghh!!”

“Shizuma-sama! Shizuma-oneesama! She...!!”

Shoot, now I've done it! Shizuma mentally scolded herself. *I forgot we were out in public, right in the hallway of Miator.* She pulled Nagisa's wrist—“Let's go, Nagisa!”—and took off as fast as she could.

“Y-you're going too fast!”

The screams and angry roars of the girls faded away almost instantly.

Huff huff huff...

Shizuma stopped just as they reached the exit. Beyond the open door was a broad, lush green lawn leading to the back gate.

Nagisa finally caught her breath. *Wow, Shizuma-oneesama must be very good at sports, although I'm not so slow myself... I can't believe she can run so fast in such a long skirt, and she's not even breathing hard at all,* Nagisa thought.

“Good, I think we fooled them about the kiss,” Shizuma murmured in a low voice as she checked to see if there were any people by the back gate.

“Huh? What did we fool them about?”

“Uh, um, uh, it's okay, it's okay. I mean, look, we managed to baffle my adorable little flowers, right?” Shizuma waved her hand frantically right in front of Nagisa's eyes.

“Oh, yes, I guess you're right. That's good! But what a shock! I never knew you were so fast!”

Shizuma looked at Nagisa's beaming smile and chuckled to herself. *Heh heh heh... My, my, you really are innocent and sweet after all, aren't you, Nagisa-chan? You're the one who was fooled, my adorable little puppy.*

Shizuma slowly put her hand to her hip and spoke more seriously. “By the way, Nagisa-chan, did you know tomorrow is Easter? It's the most important day of the year for Catholics. So we're going to the church to bring some holy water to the classrooms.”

“Oh, so that’s what they meant about being in charge of the holy water! Do you mean the church in Maiden Park?”

“Right. So we’re going to have a little date in the garden. Doesn’t that sound nice?” Shizuma took Nagisa’s arm and leisurely led her out the door.

St. Miator Girls’ Academy: it was a girls’ school with a long and distinguished history, built at the end of the Meiji era.

The old convent, sitting at the peak of the wide, hilly area that was originally called Astraea Hill, was the school’s mother institution. When the school was first founded, only girls from families that were financially blessed could receive a higher education. Even among those, Miator gathered only young ladies from the most elite families.

That single school gave the girls a consistent education from kindergarten all the way through high school. The progressive education and rigorous discipline, imparted by Catholic nuns on the convent’s vast grounds—in an environment completely forbidden to boys—made the school incredibly popular among nobles and certain rich families, who saw the need for higher education for their girls but faced limited choices.

This popularity, of course, raised the school’s status, which grew even faster as the number of newly rich families grew. Sending a daughter to St. Miator Girls’ Academy was seen as proof of success. The striking popularity brought in far more applicants than the school could handle with the space and number of staff they had. So St. Spica Girls’ Institute and St. Lulim Girls’ School were built as sister schools in order to take in the overflow.

Miator continued to focus on rigorous discipline and strict rules and an ideal, conservative, high-class education, and also boasted of the fact that over fifty percent of its girls became engaged while in school. In comparison, Spica was liberal and promoted the image of independent girls advancing in society. Lulim’s goal was the happiness of its girls, and it sought to nurture modern wives and wise mothers. Each school had its own unique atmosphere, and the varied curricula attracted a variety of applicants. The three schools of Astraea Hill remained the most popular schools in the area.

Entering the campus from the base of the hill, Miator was in the center, Spica was to the left, and Lulim was to the right. Each had its own campus, gymnasium and courtyard, and each had its own entrance as well, so although they were sister schools, they were fundamentally separate and functioned independently.

The schools did share the use of several buildings and facilities, however. One building included a large auditorium where joint events were held, a large theater and other facilities that all three schools used. There was also the convent, the mother institution of the schools, and the church associated with the convent. The schools also shared a vast garden, called Maiden Park, which stretched behind the school buildings. In the middle of the garden was a small lake, and nearby, at the apex of the hill, was the large landmark church.

There was one other facility that the schools shared. It was a triangle-shaped building quietly tucked away in the farthest corner of the campus. Its nickname was the Strawberry Dorms.

The Strawberry Dorms were the dormitories for students attending Astraea's three schools. Some of the large numbers of students who attended these famous schools came from far away. The dormitory had been built for those students for whom it would be too far to commute daily.

It also served another purpose, pursued by only a small number of schools these days, even among schools with a long legacy such as Miator: the isolation and discipline of the students.

Even though many young ladies from strict families—many from the oldest, most noble families—could potentially have commuted to their schools for the purpose of getting an education, they were still boarded in the Strawberry Dorms. There, they learned the ability to take control of their everyday lives. At the same time, these rare beauties were protected from the outside world.

It was a reminder of a time long past, when attending a girls' school was part of training in the domestic arts in preparation for becoming a wife. The young ladies who boarded in the Strawberry Dorms went to school by

walking a path through Maiden Park, and when classes were over, they walked back through the park again, back to the Strawberry Dorms. There was absolutely no chance for them to have contact with the outside world.

The girls lived entirely within the school, a pure world within the walls that was reserved only for young ladies. A world of classes, sports, friendship and love, as well as mental and emotional bonds and passionate physical aches.

All of it existing only between girls.

“Wow, it sure is a long walk just to the church, isn’t it?” Nagisa swung her arms cheerfully as she walked on the shimmering lawn.

Shizuma’s face softened as she looked at her. “That’s right. The Miator campus is big, but Maiden Park is huge. Wait, is this your first time going to the church, Nagisa? I thought there was a Mass there during opening ceremonies.”

“Oh, that day I had some transfer paperwork to fill out at the convent, and then a nun took me from the convent right to the church, so it’s my first time going to the church from the school.”

Nagisa turned to look at Shizuma, her face shining like a plump, fresh, white peach, ripened in the brilliant spring sunshine. She looked so soft and gentle... It was all Shizuma could do to keep herself from reaching out and touching her.

“Oh, I see. So then the first time you came here, Nagisa, you went through the real main gate, right?”

“Huh? The real main gate?” Afraid that maybe she’d messed something up again without even realizing it, Nagisa jerked to a stop.

When Shizuma saw the frightened expression on Nagisa’s face, something welled up in her heart. Shizuma reached out to her. “You must not know, then. It was before Miator was built. Back then, the only thing on the hill was the convent and the church. If you look from the St. Miator’s gate, you can see all of Astraea Hill. Look, can you see the large gate that leads to Maiden

Park?”

“Oh!”

Shizuma’s hand moved suddenly and brushed Nagisa’s uniform at her chest. Her dark green tie swayed gently.

“That’s the true main gate for the campus and all the buildings on the hill. A proper and holy gate, reigning over these grounds where only pure maidens live.”

Nagisa was tense for a moment, but Shizuma’s hand swept far and high, gesturing toward the part of the hill farthest away from where they stood, just visible under the clear blue sky.

With a slight blush, Nagisa looked where Shizuma pointed. She couldn’t see much, but if she strained her eyes, in the shadow of a huge tree, very far away, she saw something that looked like the corner of a giant bronze-colored gate. She looked at it and imagined what the giant main gate to this hill, where her time-honored school stood, must be like. A chill ran down her spine.

She couldn’t help but think how beautiful Shizuma looked, pointing across the sky, and was a little moved.

Shizuma took the opportunity to swing around behind Nagisa.

“That’s why the path from the gate to the church is called the old approach,” Shizuma explained as she eyed Nagisa, who was fascinated by the gate.

“No one uses the old approach now—except during the coronation of the *Étoile*, when it’s covered by countless beautiful flowers. It’s magical. Astraea has quite a lot of events...”

Carefully, so she wouldn’t brush against Nagisa, Shizuma spread her arms wide. “Hey, Nagisa. Do you know about the biggest and the best—the grandest event in Astraea? It’s the *Étoile* Competition, where the students select the couple who will represent the three schools. That is the holy place, where only the *Étoile* and her *cadette* are allowed to go.”

Nagisa's mind was still on the gate at the bottom of the hill. Shizuma examined her innocent profile, her cheeks blushing slightly as if she weren't even aware of Shizuma's wicked movements.

"So you could say," Nagisa said slowly, "that Maiden Park is the heart of Astraea, and Miator, Spica, and Lulim are its back yard."

Shizuma had the sudden urge to eat Nagisa up. She closed the circle of her arms around her. "Do you have any interest in the *Étoile*, Nagisa? If you make it through all the trials, you will become part of the greatest couple in all three schools, blessed in the presence of God himself. There are a lot of girls who would love to come here and try to become the *Étoile*."

Squeeze. I've got you!

Shizuma was just about to say it when...

"Ooooooh!" Nagisa screamed and ran two or three steps, as if she didn't even notice Shizuma's arms circling her. She flailed her arms frantically. "Ooh! Oh! Oh! Ooh! There's a CASTLE!"

When she looked back at Shizuma, Nagisa's mouth was wide open. *It looks perfect for stuffing a big onigiri in*, Shizuma thought.

Shizuma was dumbfounded for a second, but when she looked at the building Nagisa pointed to, she smiled meaningfully. "Ahh... Heh heh. The Secret Garden."

Scraaape.

The low sound of a chair scraping the floor disturbed the pleasant silence of the large open space of the main hall of the library. A student wearing a white uniform pushed her chair back and got up from the large reading table. Her short, double-breasted jacket had a wide collar and a high waist. Her matching skirt was a tight mini. It was the uniform of St. Spica Girls' Institute, with its "sailor" look.

In the silence, which was as taut as the head of a drum, the tall student was acutely aware of the attention of the other students sitting around her,

focused on her every move. Eyes peered at her from behind books propped up unnaturally on the table. When she stared back, those eyes slipped behind the books again to hide. One set of hands grasping a thick cover shook, and a book clattered against the desk.

Even here too, huh? The girl let out a small mental sigh, grabbed the book she had been reading, and left her seat, heading toward the checkout desk. At the counter was a small Miator student with bobbed hair.

“Thank you. Could you put this back for me?” the St. Spica’s girl asked.

“Sure. I’m sorry it’s reference only and you couldn’t take it out.” The girl at the counter with a library committee armband on her arm, who appeared to be a first-year, looked like she was about to cry.

The tall student, Otori Amane, couldn’t help but think, *I wish you wouldn’t get so nervous over me.*

“It’s all right. Just looking at it here was enough to see what I wanted.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.” The girl shrugged her shoulders apologetically. “All of the Astraea directories are so thick and heavy, especially this Miator directory because it has so many student pictures. That’s why it can’t be taken out.”

“I see. I was surprised, because I didn’t think very many people would even need to use this kind of book. I wondered if the restriction is meant to protect privacy.”

“There is that, too, but...here, take a look at this.” The library committee girl opened the large book to a picture that filled the entire page.

It was of a tall, beautiful, mature-looking girl, standing nobly with a crown on her head and a scepter in her hand, just like a queen. Nestled close beside her was a fragile-looking girl with very light brown hair, a small tiara on her head and a kind smile on her face. They were both wearing the uniform of St. Miator Girls’ Academy.

The page looked very well-worn. The library committee girl didn’t even have to flip through the book to find it; it had been so often looked at that it naturally opened up right to that picture.

Amane flinched. *That's the part I was just looking at.*

"It's a picture from last year's *Étoile* competition. The entire school was excited because they saw it as the birth of the greatest Miator couple in a long time. I heard that everyone in the school tried to copy this picture, and the crowd caused a huge mess."

The girl lowered her voice. "There were even some who tried to tear it out and steal it." Flustered by Amane's silence, the girl hastily put on a smile. *Oh no, now that I've said that, what if she thinks Miator is a school with loose morals?!* She quickly tried to change the subject. "Um, it has a lot of pictures of many other wonderful onesama, too. So I'm sure the restriction was also made to keep the book from going missing."

"I suppose you're right."

Noticing that Amane was at a loss for words, the library committee girl's expression turned to one of worry. "Umm, are you really sure it's all right?"

"Oh...yeah, I'm sure it's all right. There was a picture I wanted to see, just like you said. I wanted to look at it somewhere peaceful and quiet—which the St. Spica's library is not," Amane added with a somewhat bitter smile. Her words were packed with feelings of self-derision as she remembered the noise in her own school's library.

"Oh, really?! A lot of students from Spica and Lulim have been using our library lately. I'm so glad to hear people from the other schools like it here... Umm, if you like, please don't hesitate to come again. I think this is a wonderful, calm place for reading books, too! Next time I'll show you the best place in the whole library!"

She beamed, a truly genial, radiant and utterly innocent smile. Amane was just a little stunned by it, and couldn't help smiling back. *If students from Spica and Lulim are coming here often, I think it just means that the fame of the Secret Garden is spreading, that's all. Well, no matter.*

Amane put on her own smile. "Ah ha ha. Thank you. You really love this library, don't you?"

"Yes. It's like, whenever I come here, I can feel myself relaxing. I start to

feel more positive, like as long as I try my best even with the little things, I'll be happy."

Amane leaned over the counter toward the girl. Her face drew close to the girl's, as if she were going to peer into it. "What's your name?"

"Umm, my name is Tsukidate Chiyo. I really hope everyone is comfortable using this library."

Her smile gave away her shyness, but at the same time said she took pride in her duty, protecting this dignified library.

"Oh, that's a cute name. I'm Otori—"

As Amane started to give her name, the corners of Chiyo's mouth curved into a smile.

"I know."

"Huh?"

"You are Otori Amane-sama, from the Fifth Year Class *Trois* at St. Spica Girls' Institute...correct? You're famous, so I recognize you. I am honored to meet you," Chiyo said to Amane, her voice entirely unpretentious.

So she knows me? But when Amane looked at Chiyo, she felt a little relieved there were girls like her. *So, this kind of thing does happen even when I go to other schools—and it's probably only going to get worse.*

She figured she could bear it for just this one year. "I'll come back again. I hope next time we'll be able to doze off together, reading an even better book. Goodbye. Good luck with your library committee job."

She turned around and left the counter, waving a hand behind her.

Clatter clatter clatter.

Chairs clattered as several students, who must have been eavesdropping on the girls' conversation, raced toward the counter.

It wasn't a castle, it was a library.

Since Nagisa had never been inside, Shizuma said with a meaningful smile,

she would take a little detour and show her the way. Amid the profusion of small white flowers stood a white stone wall and a building that looked from the outside like an old castle.

Wooden doors three stories high were visible in the front façade. Nagisa had only ever seen such elaborate doors once before, on a school trip to an art museum.

These doors were so heavy and massive the two girls could only open one side. Beyond the doors was a cavernous entrance hall, almost as big as a classroom, with a high ceiling supported by several giant pillars.

Click. When Nagisa stepped inside, her footsteps echoed off the stone floor, which had a large black and white checkerboard pattern. The cool air brushed her skin, and it was so quiet she wondered whether there was anybody there. Coming in here from bright Maiden Park was like stepping into a completely different world. Nagisa instinctively looked up at the tall, dome-shaped ceiling. When she saw its stained-glass windows, with their beautiful geometric patterns and lily motif, she couldn't help but gasp.

Nagisa's jaw dropped. Ever since she had entered Miator, she had constantly been struck by the feeling she was on some sort of trip.

Shizuma watched with amusement. *It looks like Nagisa's ended up someplace she never imagined.*

"What's the matter? Oh, Nagisa, your mouth is hanging open like a slob!" Shizuma said, smiling as she drew up beside the flabbergasted Nagisa.

"Ah! Oh no, I-I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." Shizuma reached a hand to Nagisa's lips. "Goodness, Nagisa! You're drooling!"

Nagisa was flustered, but Shizuma invited her deeper inside the library with a big smile.

Click. Click. Click. Click. The floor faithfully made a spectacular sound with every single one of Nagisa's panicked steps.

"Please wait for me!"

Chasing after Shizuma, Nagisa entered the sacred ground beyond—the main hall. Unlike the entrance, the high-walled interior of the building had a floor with a delicate mosaic of dark, polished wood and stone. It was dimly lit and wrapped in silence.

A few lamp-like lights were situated high along the wall, which made Nagisa wonder how they changed the light bulbs. She was stunned by this seemingly empty space, but when she took a more careful look, deeper inside, she saw what seemed to be a checkout counter, all the way in the back, and the shapes of people here and there, lit by orange, flower-shaped lights.

Even though she couldn't see anyone clearly, she could hear a very faint rustling coming from a variety of places around her.

It's so quiet I thought maybe there wasn't anyone here. But still...even though it's so cool and quiet...I feel like there's an air of excitement. Like a candle flame burning without a sound.

Shizuma came up and whispered to her, "This is called the Secret Garden. It's quiet and dark, yet full of excitement—doesn't it have an atmosphere of secrecy? There's even a rumor THEY come out here."

"What 'comes out?'"

"Well...something you probably hate, Nagisa-chan."

"Something that I hate? What could that be?"

"Well...something that starts with 'g' and rhymes with 'toast.'"

"Toast... Oh, ghosts!!" Nagisa shouted without thinking.

"Shh! Don't shout like that! This is a library, you know." Shizuma hurriedly put a hand over Nagisa's mouth to quiet her, but looked like she was having a lot of fun doing it.

I can't believe there are ghosts in such a wonderful library. Nagisa was a little depressed. She really did hate ghosts.

"Hey, look," Shizuma whispered into her ear. "There are some wonderful, adorable little ghosts!"

At Shizuma's urging, Nagisa looked. Not far from where they stood were movable book racks over two meters tall. Just beyond them, through the cracks, she caught a glimpse of people moving.

"It's all right. They won't see us from here," Shizuma said in a low voice. Nagisa peered between the book cases and listened to the conversation.

"But..."

"You said you were going to do this, didn't you?"

"Yeah...but..."

"Leave it to me. You don't have to think about anything."

"...I think I..."

"Shh. Don't say it. I know what you want even without you saying it."

From between the book racks the arm of someone dressed in a white uniform reached for something, then tried to hug it close. Long, perfectly straight hair rustled against the uniform. A sweet, spicy musk emanated from the hair and wafted between the book racks toward Nagisa.

"My beloved Hikari-chan," the girl with the long hair said. "It's all right." She pulled the other girl close and gently embraced her.

"I want you to understand my feelings...just a little..."

"Ah! Ya-Yaya-chan?!"

"Shh! Be quiet."

"Ah! Aaaaugh."

The first girl squeezed the second girl tighter and tighter, twisting her body and making her skirt slide up. The short, tight skirt was part of the Spica uniform. The girl's skirt slid up so high it revealed her underpants, and her butt cheeks, pure and white, peeked from underneath the hem. The other girl slid her hands along them.

"Ah—" the young girl's voice trembled.

The hand that had been stroking her butt cheeks disappeared even further up her skirt, causing a loud cry from the girl. "Aaah..."

At that most important point, Shizuma forced Nagisa's face toward herself. "Any more will be too much for you, Nagisa-chan...right?"

Nagisa almost wanted to see more, but had the feeling it was a good thing she hadn't. *What the heck is this? What the heck is this? What the heck is this?!*

In answer to Nagisa's unspoken question, Shizuma whispered an explanation. She explained the rumors about this place and how to use it. Although there didn't *seem* to be any people, all around, in the shadows of the bookshelves, couples enjoyed secret rendezvous.

"They are sacred, modest rendezvous between maidens," she said. "Being a library, it's quiet and only certain people come here, so there aren't many interruptions. They say that ever since before anyone can remember, it's been a popular rendezvous spot for girls who long to see each other. People started calling it 'The Secret Garden.' Although the meetings are called 'rendezvous,' that doesn't necessarily mean that anything particularly 'big' happens."

That's what Shizuma said, but Nagisa wasn't sure she believed her.

It seemed one way girls had of confirming each other's love was to hide in the shadows of the bookshelves together, open books in front of them, and pretend to look into each other's book so they could secretly touch cheek to cheek. After all, that's just about all young girls are capable of doing. But they couldn't try even such a modest thing without being nudged on by the dignified, secretive, beautiful atmosphere of the library.

"At least for normal girls," Shizuma said. "That's why when you come to the library, it's definitely worth seeing the innocent, excited faces of underclassmen who are invited here by upperclassmen. Once in a while, there are girls who get wonderfully intense, like the ones you just saw. Heh heh heh. At times like that, I feel almost like I've won something. When two people love each other...it's only natural to want to touch each other more and more, Nagisa-chan."

This is bad, Nagisa thought. I-is that what a rendezvous is?! That's just... That's just... After that, did they...?

Nagisa's heart began to pound. In response to her thoughts, her body began to heat up.

Shizuma didn't seem to notice Nagisa's discomfort. "Heh heh. It looks like Spica girls have started to use it lately, too. But if they're doing it there, they must still be beginners. There's a better spot..."

THEY were just beginners? Nagisa was so shocked her jaw dropped again. And then...

Huh?!

Without realizing it at first, Nagisa found herself being hugged by Shizuma.

Nagisa's heart pounded. A cold sweat ran down her back. She remembered the couple they had just seen. The pure white uniform crumpled by the tight embrace.

The skirt that had slid up.

The hand that had gone up with it.

It's just coincidence. It's just coincidence that we ended up like this, I'm sure of it—it's because I yelled before. She tried to stop me, and... Nagisa desperately tried to convince herself.

But when she thought about where she was and what she had seen—*Could there really be girls who do things like that here?*—she felt like running away.

"Shizuma-oneesama...umm, if that's how it is, we must be bothering them, so maybe it's time for us to leave..." She tried to squirm out of Shizuma's arms, but Shizuma seemed to have anticipated Nagisa's actions.

"Tsk tsu tsu..." Shizuma gently stroked the nape of Nagisa's neck and softly whispered into her ear. "Aww, don't do that, Nagisa. You're the one who said you wanted to come here, and you invited me, you know?"

Shizuma's breath brushed against her cheek.

Shudder shudder.

Shizuma's voice was very sexy. Her breath had the fragrance of roses.

Nagisa's entire mind was suddenly a blur of pink.

"This is why we came here— isn't it? I'm so happy, Nagisa... It's all right, leave it to me. I'll be VERY gentle with you..." Shizuma's hand slowly crept its way from Nagisa's neck toward her chest.

Whaat?! Is this, is this, could this be... No, it couldn't possibly be... I mean, we're both girls!

The ribbon tie at Nagisa's chest swayed.



Ah, aaaah, it really IS!

When Nagisa thought she sensed Shizuma's fingers on her chest, she couldn't take it any more. "I-I-I-I think I'm going to leave after all! I-I have to go to the toilet." She closed her eyes, thrust herself away from Shizuma, and ran from the hall.

Shizuma was dumbfounded. "What? That is the first time something like that ever happened to me. Why—"

Moments before, Shizuma had been able to tell that a pink-colored mist had shrouded Nagisa's mind while she was in Shizuma's arms.

This is going to work, Shizuma had thought. Normally, once Shizuma brought a girl that far, she would fall right into Shizuma's hands.

"I've never brought a girl that far and had her slip out of my arms before."

"I have to go to the toilet?" Hmph. She has no sense for mood.

"But no matter. I've taken even more interest in you now, Nagisa."

You, who are actually capable of rejecting me...

Shizuma smiled with obvious delight and quietly walked after Nagisa.

"Jeez, Shizuma-oneesama, Shizuma-oneesama, Shizuma-oneesama!!"

Nagisa walked quickly toward the entrance, her head down and eyes glued to the floor.

I'm so embarrassed! I don't know how to face Shizuma-oneesama. Even if it was due to circumstances, I still pushed her away. Aahh, I probably made Onesama angry with me. Even though she was nice enough to offer to teach me how to handle the holy water... That's right, what if she didn't mean it that way at all, and I just completely misunderstood? When I felt her fingertips brush against my bare skin between the buttons of my uniform, I might have been imagining things. Yeah, that's right. This uniform is really tight, so it wouldn't open up that easily, I'm sure of it.

And yet she still kept walking quickly ahead, not even looking in front of

her.

Bwam.

She bumped into someone. She quickly looked up. “Oh! I-I’m sorry!” Standing there was the first-year library committee member, Tsukidate Chiyo.

“Nagisa-oneesama!”

“Chiyo-chan!”

Thwump thwump. Chiyo’s arms turned to jelly, letting the books she held fall onto the floor. She was only a lowly committee member, and she had only become a library committee member because she didn’t have any other talents.

I like doing an honest job in this beautiful library, and I’m happy working here, but up until now, I never really got anything special out of being a library committee member. But ahh, this time I’m thrilled! I was able to see Nagisa-oneesama in the library!

Chiyo’s heart felt like it would burst with joy. *I just met the shining white Prince of Spica, Otori Amane-sama, and now I get to see Nagisa-oneesama, too!*

Chiyo hurriedly tried to figure out what she had done to suddenly deserve this. “Nagisa-oneesama! Did you come looking for a book? I’m a library committee member! I’m so glad to see you! By all means, please allow me to help y—”

Her joy only lasted a moment.

Click click click click.

From behind Nagisa came the sound of someone running—certainly an unexpected noise in a library. Chiyo gasped, in unison with Nagisa, who turned to look behind her. A girl ran toward them, her long hair flowing behind her. It was none other than....

“Shi-Shizuma-oneesama?!” Chiyo doubted her own eyes.

Shizuma didn’t even give Chiyo a second glance. “Nagisa-chan! So here you

are!" She suddenly embraced Nagisa. "I've caught you! And this time I won't let you go!"

Nagisa simply stiffened helplessly.

Seeing the two of them like that gave Chiyo a huge shock. Instantly, hot tears started to well up in Chiyo's large, round, doll-like eyes.

Drip...drip drip drip.

As she watched the two of them, tears that shone like jewels fell one after the other.

What's wrong with me? Why am I crying again? If I let her see me like this, it'll scare Nagisa-oneesama. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Come on, Chiyo, you shouldn't cry! But, but, but, but... Waaaah! Nagisa-oneesama is—she's already taken by Shizuma-oneesama!

Chiyo ran off without a word, crying.

Nagisa was so dumbfounded she couldn't move. *What in the world just happened?*

When Shizuma looked at Chiyo, getting farther and farther away, and at the state Nagisa was in, she felt just a little bit guilty. With an unusually awkward look on her face, Shizuma said, "Now that you've seen the library, why don't we go to the Lourdes Spring next? It's along the path to the church. It's a mysterious spring that can make miracles happen. Something might even happen between you and me."

Chiyo ran and ran, until she found herself standing in the hallway in front of Nagisa's classroom. Recently this had become Chiyo's regular spot for secretly peeking at Nagisa.

It was sacred ground...that brought back the memory of when she had first met Nagisa.

At the time, Chiyo had been crying, as usual. *Nagisa-oneesama probably thinks I'm a big crybaby*, she thought, her tear-soaked face shining.

Chiyo had been having problems back then, too...

A small white butterfly had fallen right in the middle of the hallway. For a moment, Chiyo had thought, *Oh, there's a beautiful white butterfly*, but then she realized the butterfly wasn't moving at all and froze. Her legs stiffened and she couldn't move.

But I have to go to the faculty room, so I need to pass it no matter what...

Chiyo loved flowers, so she was a part of the gardening club, and one of her strong points was her knowledge of insects. She could touch beautiful butterflies and adorable tent caterpillars.

But even Chiyo was too scared to get close to a dead bug. Just a few moments ago, it had been happily fluttering around in the sky, but now it was dead and nothing but a cast-off skin. When Chiyo thought about that, she got really depressed, and felt like she was being dragged down by something scary—it was frightening.

“Poor thing. And what a place for it to happen.”

The voice belonged to someone Chiyo had never seen at the school before. When the girl saw the butterfly, she walked up to it, gently picked it up, and placed it in her palm. She did it so lovingly, with the smile of a gentle goddess.

The girl gently blew a breath across her palm, and the butterfly's wings trembled along with the breath. To Chiyo, it looked like she gave the butterfly its last rites—one last moment of warmth.

She's saying goodbye to it. How kind.

This girl gave love to something Chiyo was too afraid of to even get close to. The girl released the butterfly out the hallway window, saying, “Be a good girl—go on home, now!” Even though it was already dead. Though Chiyo thought the upperclassman seemed to be under the impression the butterfly was still alive.

But it might be better for it to return to the ground, instead of staying in the cold hallway, she thought as she watched the older girl.

And then...

There was a miracle.

Chiyo had thought the dead butterfly would naturally fall to the ground. But just when she thought it was going to hit the ground, it stopped in mid-air. The next moment, it started moving again, flapping its wings.

It's magic, Chiyo thought. Chiyo's goddess, who was kind even to an insect that was almost dead, said her name was Aoi Nagisa.

My dream was to share lunch in the garden with Nagisa-oneesama some day. I thought I would be happy just watching Oneesama from afar. But then I thought Nagisa-oneesama might see me when she leaves the classroom, so I've been hiding behind this pillar whenever I have the chance... But that dream's not going to come true now. If Shizuma-oneesama has taken a liking to Nagisa-oneesama—there's absolutely no chance for me.

Tears streamed from Chiyo's eyes again as she thought about it.

This must be punishment for thinking such a brazen thing. Because I wanted Oneesama to find me.

"Huh?" someone said as she passed. It was Tamao. She looked like she was about to go back to the dorms. "Chiyo-chan? What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Ta-Tamao-oneesama," Chiyo sobbed, and told Tamao everything.

When Tamao heard about the situation, she burned with jealousy. "Shizuma-oneesama hugged Nagisa-chan?! I absolutely, definitely cannot allow it!"

The image of Shizuma doing things to Nagisa in the library, and the image of Nagisa having things done to her by Shizuma in the library, ran through Tamao's mind. She had a vivid imagination.

No, I cannot allow such a thing! Having fun with Nagisa-chan is MY job!

The dismissal bell rang.

Diiing dooong...

Diiing dooong...

The girl heard the bell and turned around. “Huh? Oh no, it’s time to go home already.”

The sunlight coming in the fifth-floor window shone sharply through the glass. The light wrapped the floor in a red glow and shone all the way to the back of the long room.

“Well, then, is that all for everyone for today?”

St. Spica Girls’ Institute, the second school, was built to the east of St. Miator Girls’ Academy. It was the tallest building in the area. On the top floor was the Spica Student Council meeting room.

The room had a white steel frame, four glass walls and a frosted glass partition, making it look like the inside of a modern office building.

“Then it’s decided. For this year’s *Étoile* competition, we’ll be going with *Trois Lumières*. The first competition, *L’Ouverture brillante*, will be held at the end of April. We will inform the candidates.”

The girl, wearing the white Spica uniform and looking majestic, stood alone in front of one of the glass walls, which was colored a bright orange by the sun. Passing her eyes over the documents in front of her, she continued.

“We have a number of couples who have already handed in their applications—four from St. Miator Girls’ Academy, five from St. Spica Girls’ Institute and three from St. Lulim Girls’ School. Taking into account any last-minute applications, I think the total number is most likely going to be around fifteen couples. We will eliminate approximately half in the initial competition, and we will eliminate half of the remaining couples in the second competition, *L’Épreuve d’amour*. As is customary, the final competition, *Le Dernier Miracle*, will be held by the school attended by the couple who takes first place in the second competition. The coronation of the *Étoile* is planned immediately after the third competition. However, we need time to prepare, and I think it might cause problems for the school

whose couple took first place in *L'Épreuve d'amour*, so..." Phew... She had said all of that in one breath.

Tomori Shion, President of Spica's Student Council, was a delicate girl, slim, who looked good in the white uniform. She let out a soundless sigh. Her long chestnut hair was left loose, with only the top part tied up. Her gracefully exposed forehead gave her an air of intelligence. Her small, tipped-up nose and sharp chin gave her an ever-so-slight aura of sternness. She gave such a serious impression that the only thing missing was a set of silver-rimmed glasses.

She was a tough beauty with a sharp mind.

I can relax a little now we've gotten this far. The only thing left to do now is leave things up to the flow of the river and take my time preparing. I've done everything I can for now.

Shion gathered the papers together and tapped them against the desk to stack them neatly.

"As all of you are aware..." She looked at everyone around her, checking every single person's expression. Sitting around the large meeting table in Spica's Student Council room were three representatives from each school—the Student Council President, the Vice President, and the Secretary—as well as other Student Council staff.

Shion gathered her strength once more, straightened up, and continued. "We at St. Spica Girls' Institute will be making preparations beforehand..."

"Wait just a moment, please, if you would?"

A girl, sitting across and to the left at the large triangular table, raised her hand.

"Is there some sort of problem, Lulim Student Council President?" Shion asked, knitting her eyebrows ever so slightly. *I wonder what it is? We're almost finished.*

"What do you mean, Spica will be handling the preparations this year?" she asked in a rather gentle manner, completely different from the sharp voice she'd used a moment earlier. She tilted her head sweetly to the side.

She wore the St. Lulim Girls' School uniform, with its warm pink checkerboard pattern.

She was the Lulim Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru, from Fifth Year Class A. Her long, luxurious hair flowed behind her and, in ladylike fashion, she wore a fine braid and ribbon beside each ear. Even though she seemed tall, she gave off a delicate impression. Underneath her black bangs, her large, kind eyes gave her a wise expression. When she tilted her head, her hair swayed airily, as if joining her in asking, "Why would you say that?"

Shion was stunned. "What is this about? Why are you bringing this up now...?" She suddenly shut her mouth. In the face of such a direct question, she couldn't say a thing, because bringing something like this up in the joint Student Council was not Shion's usual way of doing things.

The fact that Spica will win this year's Étoile competition is set in stone!

Or at least that's what she thought. Even if it was obvious that everyone in the room thought so too...she absolutely could not say something in such bad taste.

Shion's previous utterance had apparently not been phrased diplomatically enough. She heard a smothered laugh coming from somewhere beside her.

"Heh heh heh heh..."

Another girl jumped to Shion's defense. "Oh, come now, President Chikaru. Everyone already knows why, even without saying. But of course! It is because our Prince of Spica is this year's *Étoile*! You know that, and yet you go and ask that question? President Chikaru, you really are a meanie, aren't you? Shion is working so hard, and you're teasing her. Do you think Shion is that cute? I'm a little jealous."

Shion panicked. "Hey, Mo-Momomi! I mean, Kiyashiki-san, what are you saying?! If you say something like that..."

The girl sitting next to Shion, Kiyashiki Momomi from Fifth Year Class *Un* and Vice President of St. Spica Girls' Institute's Student Council, saw the

state Shion was in. She hid her mouth behind her fan and continued, “Oh, come on, Shion, don’t be so surprised. You want to say, ‘If you say that, it will all be over,’ right? Heh heh heh. It’s all right, everyone here already knows it. And everyone knows President Chikaru is so kind, even if she does love teasing you. Come on, cheer up!”

The girl’s face was framed by loose curls of hair, and she had large, doll-like eyes, showy eyelashes, a long, slender, high nose, and a large mouth. She gave a smile so flowery it seemed to envelop the entire area in the aroma of perfume.

It appeared Momomi was friends with the Lulim Student Council President. In spite of Shion’s shocked state, the conversation continued.

“Oh, I love you just as much as Shion-chan, you know, Momomi-chan?” Chikaru said. “You’re the only girl in all of Spica who looks good in those curls.”

“Woow! President Chikaru, that makes me so happy! Then next time let me be in charge of doing the rosary, okay?”

Momomi turned to Shion and said, “If you let something like this get you so flustered, you’ll be a disgrace to your nickname, Snow Queen. You’re supposed to be the greatest prodigy since Spica was founded.”

She waved her fan, trying to get Shion to look forward.

Shion’s mouth had been hanging open. When she heard the name “Snow Queen,” she came back to herself. “Hmph. I couldn’t care less about that nickname!”

Well, whatever. There’s no use in trying to hide it NOW. Seriously. Everyone already knows it, right? This year, SHE is finally going to enter the Étoile competition. I mean, ever since she entered Spica, her first year of middle school, it’s been said that if the Prince of Spica ever entered the competition, she would definitely win. She’s tremendously popular but very shy, so up until now she’s always declined to participate. But now that she’s in her fifth year, it’s her last chance. “Before I become a sixth-year student and am too busy with entrance exams to enter the competition, I just can’t refuse any more.” I’m sure that’s what she’s thinking. Fortunately, there aren’t many significant

rivals right now. She will become the greatest Étoile these schools have ever seen. And I will become the most famous Student Council President of all time, and make it a total “Spica Year” to enjoy to my heart’s content!

Shion renewed the determination in her heart and composed herself. “I am terribly sorry, Lulim Student Council President. It seems I spoke too soon. I heard that Otori-san was planning to enter this year, and I just... I have a slight habit of worrying about things that are still too far in the future.”

“Yes, we already know that, of course, Spica Student Council President,” her enemy muttered meaningfully with a sugary smile. Her voice was so soft Shion could barely hear her. “But I think it might be better if you did not let your guard down.”

“Let my guard down?”

It was a remark no one could ignore.

Light from the setting sun shone through the window. For a moment, Shion entered battle mode. “Do you have some new information?” She took a step forward and shot Chikaru a sharp look. “Does Lulim have a strong candidate? Is that what you are suggesting, President Chikaru?”

Tension overwhelmed the entire room.

“Oooh, scary!” Momomi muttered. She opened her fan and seemed to be talking to the panda on it when she said, “She really IS the Snow Queen, isn’t she?”

Chikaru didn’t budge an inch. She gave Shion a wink. “Oh, come now, I’m hurt, Spica Student Council President. We’ve known each other since we were children, Shion-chan, so I wouldn’t do something like that to you, now would I? I’m not THAT much of a bully. But, then again...do we really know each other that well? However...I’ve heard St. Miator has a new transfer student in the Fourth Year.”

Across from Chikaru, sitting to Shion’s right, a Miator student council member twitched.

Shion was not to be intimidated. “I haven’t heard anything about an

upperclassman transfer student at Miator.”

Tension rushed through the three representatives from Spica.

And worry flitted across the faces of those from Miator.

Chikaru slowly continued, “Just a little while ago, I heard a rumor... They say the previous *Étoile* has a strong interest in that transfer student.”

Tomori Shion knocked her chair over with a loud noise. She glared at another girl seated at the table. “The previous *Étoile*?”

The object of Shion’s stare, Miator’s Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki from Fifth Year Flower Class, let out a huge breath.

They’re not here. They’re not here. They’re STILL not here. For goodness sake!

Tamao was about to unconsciously snap the tip of the tree branch in front of her when she came back to herself with a start. The shadows of the trees, which spread out as if to hide Tamao, were becoming thicker.

Before Tamao even noticed it, little Chiyo stood next to her, frightened and looking at her questioningly.

“Oh! Oh, I’m sorry,” Tamao said. “I didn’t mean to... Did I scare you?”

Chiyo shook her head, trying to say “No, not at all” without actually saying a single word.

Seeing Chiyo’s cute face calmed Tamao a little bit. “Shizuma-oneesama and Nagisa-chan sure are late, aren’t they?”

“Yes. At this rate, they might miss the dorm curfew.” Chiyo looked at the large watch she wore, which didn’t look quite right on her small arm.

Tamao continued looking through the trees. “Shizuma-oneesama did say they were going to Lourdes, right?”

“Yes. But I was kind of far away by then, so maybe I just THOUGHT I heard her say that...” Chiyo said, her voice trailing off.

“Knowing Shizuma-oneesama, it certainly seems possible. First the Secret

Garden, then the miraculous spring—I'm sure she's plotting something bad again."

Chiyo was so scared she let out a soundless scream and stepped back.

Rustle. The sound of the evening breeze passed through the grass.

"News reaches you quickly, as always, President Chikaru," Miyuki said in a surly voice. Wearing Miator's classic charcoal uniform, she sat calmly with her eyes closed. Her luxurious black hair was bobbed, cut absolutely straight just below her chin, and glistened like it was wet. The sharp edge of it covered almost a third of her small face. Almost an expression of her personality, the blade-like edge swayed over her fine features.

"So you say you're only a semi-retired Student Council President, still doing it because there were no other candidates. How modest. You, Chikaru, have served as Student Council President for an unprecedented two consecutive terms, starting in your fourth year. It seems I can't call you 'The Holy Mother of Lulim, who has nothing to do with ambition,' after all. I'm impressed you heard the news long before Spica, when they are so desperate to take the title of *Étoile*. I suppose I should have expected—"

"Hold it, was that a sarcastic remark toward Spica?!" Shion's cheeks burned.

Miyuki, however, stayed in her seat and didn't meet anyone's gaze. She continued to speak, perfectly calm.

"—I suppose I should have expected nothing less from the person they call 'The Shadow Empress of Astraea.'"

Her eyes gleamed with a strong will as her clear leadership ability began to express itself.

Chikaru answered in a cold voice. "Thank you for the compliment. But I wonder if the nickname Shadow Empress isn't more appropriate for YOU? Aren't you the 'Princess of Rokujo-in,' a schemer with a reputation of being able to control vengeful demons? I know perfectly well that just because Shizuma-sama is a sixth-year student now, and just because Spica has Otori

Amane, Miator isn't necessarily going to give up on taking the title of *Étoile* so easily."

Momomi started talking to the panda again. "Whoa, scary. I didn't know President Chikaru could be so shrewd. Scary..."

Meanwhile, Shion finally regained her composure. "So, is that how it is?"

Chikaru smiled gently at Shion. "Yes, so you finally understand, Shion-chan? I'm so glad. Amane-chan is truly wonderful, and I also think she would fit the role of *Étoile* perfectly. It's no wonder you are so fired up about the possibility of Spica winning the *Étoile* title this year. But—"

"I-I am not fired up!"

"But you were, weren't you?" Momomi said to the panda, in order to avoid the glare from beside her. "Didn't you look outside the dormitory window and shout to the night sky, 'To be Student Council President the same year the star, Prince Amane, is here! This must be my destiny. I was guided by the star of Spica!'"

Chikaru continued, ignoring Momomi, "Miator will never allow that, you know."

Gulp. When Chikaru said that, Shion caught her breath.

"It isn't personal, you know. That's just how Miator is. No matter how calm it may seem on the surface, if it's not always top on the list, if it's not always number one, it won't stop until it is. The fact that over two-thirds of all the *Étoiles* have come from Miator isn't simply coincidence, or simply because of Miator's long history. Like what is happening now. Even if there is a girl that everyone agrees should become the *Étoile*, if she's not a student at Miator, Miator is too proud to accept it, and anyone who makes light of Miator might find a painful trap waiting for them—"

"Ahahaha!" Miyuki suddenly burst out in throaty laughter. "Oh, come now, President Chikaru, no need to say such things. I just have a bad temper, that's all. Please do not talk about Miator's dark side. It's just that I...I just don't want to worship an *Étoile* from another school while I am Student Council President. I think many of the other Miator students feel the same

way.”

With that, everyone picked up the documents and scissors strewn on the table and slowly prepared to go home, completely ignoring the dumbfounded Shion.

Miyuki began to speak candidly. “It is exactly as you said—we had half given up on this year’s *Étoile* competition. After all, Prince Amane is a fifth-year student this year. Just for this year. If we could somehow fight the fact that Chikaru’s been President for two consecutive years, we might have a fighting chance, but...”

“But?” Shion shot her a harsh look.

“But you know...” Chuckling to herself, Miyuki took a long hard look at Shion’s face.

Making use of her famous family name, Miyuki’s nickname was The Princess of Rokujo Institute. Her appearance was perfectly Japanese. Her glossy, straight black hair was fastidiously cut, and made her pale skin seem even paler. Combined with the delicate bridge of her nose, her kind eyes and her small, rosebud lips, she had the elegance and dignity of a princess.

“It’s exactly as President Chikaru said.” She cast her eyes down in embarrassment.

“Like Chikaru said?”

Shion remembered. *Chikaru said an upperclassman transferred into Miator this spring, which is unusual. And for some reason the previous Étoile has taken an interest in her—but so? Why bring up the previous Étoile now?*

“It looks like you remember. That’s right...it seems that Hanazono Shizuma-sama, the previous *Étoile*, the onesama that every student in Miator admires and adores—has shown a significant interest in a new fourth-year student who just transferred into the school. I only just heard it recently myself, but...I heard that when they embraced, the scene was so bright the people around them had to cover their eyes. So I predict there is a greater than ninety percent chance that Shizuma-sama will say...” Miyuki put on a fake smile, like one might see on a receptionist. “I want to try

becoming the *Étoile* with her.”

“But Shizuma-sama’s a sixth-year, getting ready for entrance exams. Not only that, but she’s been the *Étoile* once already.”

“That doesn’t matter to her. To her, being the *Étoile* was just one more required school experience. Even if she didn’t particularly want to become *Étoile*, it would’ve been even stranger for her NOT to, that’s all. She might not seem like she has any particular attachment to the title, but if she can turn it into an excuse for love, it’s a completely different story. According to my information, it’s unusual for Miator to accept a transfer student who spent her middle-school years in a different school...” Miyuki’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah...I suppose you could say she’s the excessively cheerful, needy type? I’m a little surprised Shizuma-sama would set her heart on her, but it’s obvious that she doesn’t understand the logic of Miator, and she’s giving Shizuma-sama trouble.”

Before she even realized it, Momomi was pulled into Miyuki’s story. She had an excited smile on her face as she listened. “She’s giving Shizuma-sama trouble? Wow, she must be something else, then.” Shion thought she picked a strange point to be impressed about.

Miyuki went on, “Of course, it’s only a matter of time before she comes in front of our Student Council. It’s just, the only problem is...”

Momomi looked entranced. “The problem is...?”

“That girl is a brand-new fourth-year student who doesn’t know Miator’s customs, who can’t comprehend beautiful sisterly love. And yet Shizuma-sama seems TERRIBLY excited about having her as her partner.”

“Wow...terribly...” Shion muttered, dodging the topic. “Won’t they just end up breaking up? When she’s chasing after slippery prey, Shizuma-sama—well, she uses up an incredible amount of energy. There’s nothing she cannot achieve, but it takes a lot of energy.”

Miyuki stood. She had an unexpectedly short, slender build. “When Shizuma-sama decides she wants to do something, no battle is too tough for her, not even the *Étoile* competition. Yes, I am already well aware of what the Spica Student Council intends to do this year. But we will not let an

opportunity such as this slip by. Please understand, we look forward to competing against you.”

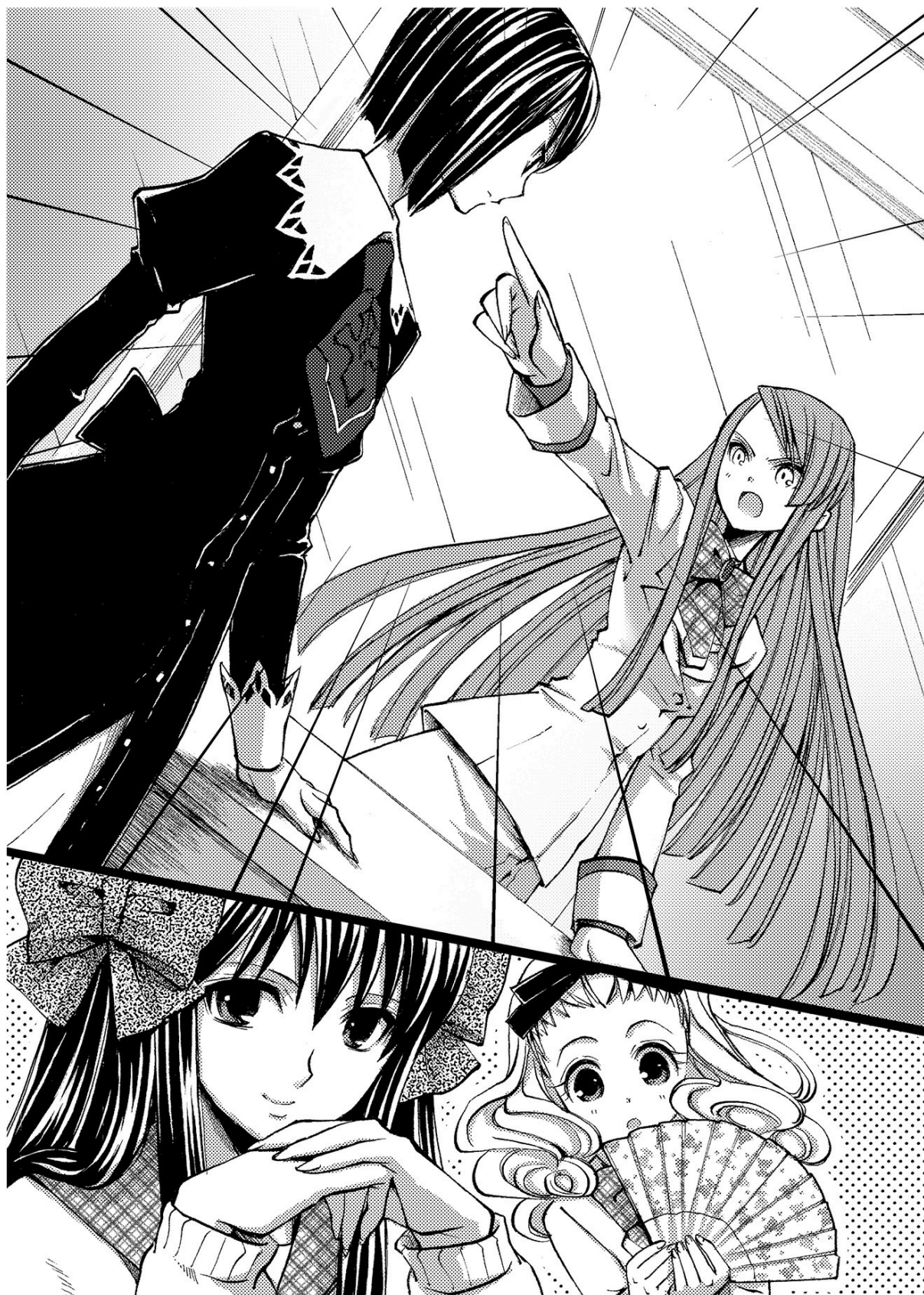
She made a slow, courteous bow. It was unusual, for although she lowered her head, it looked almost like she tossed it back in retort.

Shion noticed Miyuki’s behavior. “Rokujo-san, is that...is that a declaration of war?!”

Bwsh. Without thinking, she whipped her arm around and pointed, almost hitting Miyuki’s eyes and nose. So close, and so strong...

Ah...shoot.

But it was too late. Tension rushed through everyone in the room.



Miyuki slowly smiled. “My, my.” She gently grabbed Shion’s arm to move it away.

“I could ask you the same thing, Tomori-san. What you just did is forbidden in Astraea. It is the sign of a challenge.”

“Oh, I, I didn’t mean to...” In a panic, Shion tried to pull her arm back, but Miyuki already had a tight grip on it, so she couldn’t move.

Pointing at someone with the index finger was taboo for young ladies. Especially if it stopped right in front of that person’s nose. In Astraea, it was said to be a signal of challenging someone to battle.

Miyuki slowly drew closer, threatening. “Up until now, I hadn’t thought there was any particular need to challenge you... However, thanks to President Chikaru’s untimely interference, there’s no longer any need to hide it.” Miyuki slowly brought Shion’s hand to her lips and kissed it.

“An oncoming enemy should be fought with love. The Miator Student Council accepts your challenge with all of its power. Please go gently on us. Now then, it is past time to leave school, so if you will excuse me.”

She turned around and walked quickly out of the room without looking back.

The two Miator students who remained, the Vice President and the Secretary, rushed after her. Shion could only stand there, speechless, and watch them leave.

Miator’s first dismissal time was at 4:30 P.M. The second dismissal time was after club activities were over, at 5:30. There was also a special dismissal time of 6:00 P.M., which was used only for events like the Culture Festival. The second and third times could change by fifteen minutes either way, depending on the amount of daylight, but the first dismissal time was the same for the entire year.

The regular students had to leave when they heard the dismissal bell, because those precious students, entrusted to the school by their families,

had to return home before it got dark.

Once they left the school, there were two places the students went. Some went directly down the hill to the path that led to the closest station. Others went alongside the school buildings, passed in front of St. Lulim Girls' School, walked around the outer edge of Maiden Park and headed toward the back. To the Strawberry Dorms.

The building, which was close to the deepest part of Maiden Park, was plain-looking but solidly built from brick and tile. With the lush green Maiden Park as its landscape, it had an indescribable atmosphere, like a secret hideout.

The Strawberry Dorms, which only successful applicants could enter, were used jointly by all three schools. The building itself was an unusual triangular shape, and each of the schools had their dorm in a different section. In the center was a courtyard. The Miator dorm had a small place of worship attached to it, which looked like a strawberry stem, so the students affectionately called the whole dormitory the Strawberry Dorms. Its proper name was Astraea Hall.

Movement from one school's dorm to another school's dorm was fundamentally forbidden, and the tips of the triangle were not connected. There were skywalks on the second-floor level that linked the three buildings together. Only those who had permission from the dorm manager or the nun who acted as dorm mother could pass through.

Miator's second dismissal time was about to pass. Walking back to the Strawberry Dorms took a little less than twenty minutes, so Shizuma and Nagisa had to come back along this path. Chiyo and Tamao had decided to leave school and wait along the path that went to the Strawberry Dorms.

It had been mostly Tamao's idea.

Chiyo was so excited she thought she would die. *I can't believe I'm waiting for my longed-for onesama! I want to see Nagisa-onesama, too, but Shizuma-onesama is—how should I greet her? She probably thinks this is all a huge bother, because Shizuma-onesama seems to really like Nagisa-*

oneesama. And when Nagisa-oneesama is with a wonderful person like Shizuma-oneesama, someone like me doesn't even compare! I just know it! I just know it! I'll only be a nuisance...

Just as large tears were about to fall from Chiyo's eyes again, she heard the sound of talking from the other side of the wall of trees, which was so overgrown it looked like a hedge.

It was a nun, and it sounded like she was scolding someone.

"This isn't like you at all, Hanazono-san. Be more careful from now on. It's already time for you to be back at the dorm, so please go home now."

Tamao opened a space between the tree branches and peeked through. Shizuma and Nagisa were there, next to the side door of the church, which was closed. They stood in front of the nun with their heads bowed meekly.

The church was closed because students used to just stop there along the way to somewhere else. It looked like even though Shizuma and Nagisa were in charge of the holy water, they hadn't gotten it quickly enough, so the nun had to make special arrangements for them to get in.

The nun left and Shizuma started complaining. "Honestly, Sister Sakaue is so annoying, broody and strict. She's a bully. They call it holy water, but in the end it's just water, isn't it?" She swung the heavy crystal bottle used to hold the holy water.

Tamao couldn't help but laugh. "My, are you sure you should be saying something like that, Shizuma-oneesama?"

"Who's there?!"

Tamao poked her head through the hole she had made in the branches.

"Tamao-chan?!" Shizuma and Nagisa were stunned.

When Nagisa saw Tamao, she looked incredibly happy. Shizuma seemed just a little uncomfortable. Tamao was convinced. *There's nothing between those two yet.* In a voice soft enough they wouldn't hear, she whispered to Chiyo, "It looks like I still have a prayer!"

Chiyo raised her head with a jolt.

“You were on your way home, correct, Shizuma-oneesama?” Tamao said as she slowly made her way forward.

“Yes.” Shizuma had been looking off to the side, staring into the distance. But now she turned her head and gazed at Tamao’s face. For a moment, Shizuma regained the aura of the poised, quiet, strong queen.

Tamao felt overwhelmed, but she managed to say in a clipped voice, “The dismissal bell rang a long time ago. It’s not like you to stay behind until this late.”

Shizuma responded indifferently, “Yeah, well, we were in charge of the holy water today. We got a little sidetracked, and we’re late.” She was nonchalant, like she was flicking away a little cocklebur pod that had gotten on her uniform.

Just a little sidetracked?! Nagisa shuddered. It felt like she was leading me on an all-out tour of Maiden Park. And we even got yelled at by the nun...

Nagisa threw a questioning look at Shizuma, who ignored it and turned her eyes to the trees, which were almost glowing red in the sunset. “The sun’s already set.”

Until a moment ago, Shizuma had been having fun and enjoying herself, and seemed like a perfectly normal high-school girl, just like the other ones Nagisa knew. But the quick change in her attitude worried Nagisa. *Oh, Shizuma-oneesama...up until a moment ago...up until a moment ago you were having so much fun.*

Overwhelmed by Shizuma’s transformation, Nagisa wondered if this was who Shizuma really was, and was amazed.

When I look at her like this, Shizuma-oneesama really is beautiful and wonderful, and I guess mature. Using the word feels a little strange, but she seems stately, I guess. I was a little shocked by how Shizuma-oneesama acted in the library, but...I’m sure it was because of the special atmosphere the library has. I’m sure I was mistaken.

Thoughts ran through Nagisa’s mind as she looked at Shizuma in profile, gazing at the trees.

I got caught up in the strange atmosphere, and it made me feel like Shizuma-oneesama was se-seducing me.

All of a sudden, she was embarrassed. *I wonder what Shizuma-oneesama thought... Maybe everyone could tell exactly what I was thinking and they think I'm stupid. Yeah, I'm such an idiot. That I thought even for a moment someone like Shizuma-oneesama might be in love with me...*

The wind blew.

Nagisa shivered. *It's cold!*

Shizuma's hair blew in the cold early spring evening breeze.

Shizuma-oneesama... Stealing furtive glances at Shizuma's beautiful profile started to make Nagisa a little sad, but she still kept looking.

Tamao caught sight of Nagisa out of the corner of her eye and could tell what was going on. She still wasn't crushed.

"Oh, is that what it was? Tsukidate-san just told me she saw you and Nagisa-chan in the library—oh, please let me introduce you. Nagisa is a new student, just transferred into the same class as me. By coincidence, she's also in the seat next to mine, and we are sharing a room at the dorm! We have a wonderful connection—"

"Right, by coincidence." Shizuma's voice was so low when she spoke, only Nagisa could hear her.

Tamao continued, "Chiyo-chan told me what happened, and...well, considering the place, I asked her for some details..."

Chiyo's face went beet-red.

"I was worried that maybe my Nagisa-chan made some sort of careless mistake with you..."

"...MY Nagisa-chan?" Shizuma said in an unexpectedly sharp voice.

"Yes, MY Nagisa-chan." Tamao smiled so broadly her eyes closed. It was as if the humble attitude she'd had up until now were a lie.

"Is that so? Your Nagisa-chan made a careless mistake with me?"

"Yes, that's right. My precious friend Nagisa-chan isn't used to it here yet, so when I heard she was caught by a star like you, Shizuma-oneesama, I was

worried perhaps she was totally embarra—I mean, she did something rude.”

The longer Shizuma forced herself to keep her mouth closed, the more Tamao piled on the taunts.

“Just like I thought, she really did do something rude, didn’t she? Shizuma-oneesama, please forgive her. She isn’t used to life here at Miator yet. If she did do something rude, it is the fault of the entire Fourth Year Moon Class. No, it is my fault, because I haven’t properly taught her the customs at Miator yet, even though we share the same room. Please punish me. Punish me for all of the calamities Nagisa-chan caused...”

Tamao suddenly became overdramatic. With a flourish, she got down on her knees and bowed her head, then clasped both of her hands as if she were praying.

Shizuma looked down on Tamao silently.

Chiyo froze.

Snap snap snap snap.

When Nagisa heard the noise, she felt like a fat, cold, giant icicle had descended between the two girls. Frantic, she stepped between them.

“O-oh, come now, Tamao-chan, not another one of those jokes! Please don’t kneel like that.” *Honestly. Why do the girls from Miator make such a big deal out of everything?* “Jeez, Tamao-chan, you’re always joking around like that!”

With a wry smile, Nagisa reached her hand out to Tamao. “You don’t have to say stuff like that! You’re pretty and smart and fun, and you’re SO nice to a transfer student like me. I’m so thankful for everything you’ve done,” Nagisa mumbled, helping Tamao stand up.

Tamao very happily took a gentle hold of Nagisa’s extended hand and stood up firmly. Tamao’s hand was cold.

I wonder if Tamao-chan was waiting here a long time? Nagisa thought. “Listen, I might not be strong enough to be your best friend, Tamao-chan, but of course you’re already my best friend in Miator!”

“Na-Nagisa-chan...” Tamao drew away from the words that had slipped out of Nagisa’s mouth. *Incredible. How honest and up-front she is.*

Tamao felt like she had been shot through the heart by the straightforward words she couldn’t possibly have said. Living in the feminine environment of Miator, Tamao had seen more “best friends” and “lovers” than she could count, but the words always seemed so empty when said out loud.

It felt like as soon as she said them, something was lost. Like desperately trying to stop a lie once spoken.

We’re number one best friends, right? Every time Tamao had heard those words, every time she had responded to them, she had felt a part of herself fade.

But Nagisa’s words were different. She’d felt that way ever since they’d first met, and she had a feeling she was beginning to understand why she was so attracted to Nagisa.

Tamao had a habit of trying to manipulate a situation by tossing around superficial words. But the words that fell from Nagisa’s mouth were always just words, nothing more, nothing less. They had substance.

Nagisa simply grasped things as they were.

You’re so honest and straightforward, Tamao thought. *Almost impossibly so. I wonder if I’m so warped because of the kind of home I was raised in.* She looked back on her past and started to feel a little lonely.

Number one best friends... Tamao felt it was a little different from what she’d wanted, but now that Nagisa had said it, Tamao thought maybe she wanted really to be “number one best friends” after all.

Before Chiyo realized, she muttered aloud, her eyes gleaming, “Nagisa-oneesama is really a nice person, isn’t she? She’s like a pure angel. I think everyone who meets her will fall in love with her!”

Chiyo could almost see adorable white butterflies fluttering around Nagisa.

Tamao hid her self-consciousness. “Well, that makes me happy, Nagisa-chan. I think I could live on nothing but those words for a whole week. You must be vitamins sent by God just for me! Ooh, I just want to eat you up! I guess this means I’m Nagisa-chan’s number one, right?” She winked suggestively.

“Ah ha! Ah ha ha ha ha! You’re saying weird things again, Tamao-chan! You’re so funny! Isn’t she, Shizuma-oneesama?”

When Nagisa turned to look at Shizuma, the sound of silence echoed back to her.

Huh?

Shizuma radiated an icy aura, as if her whole body were frozen. “You two seem to be enjoying yourselves.”

Chiyo’s body shook, startled. *Oh no, I went too far—I think.*

Tamao instantly stepped away from Nagisa and stood there stiffly, her mouth open.

Without even looking at Nagisa, Shizuma placed her hand gently on the younger girl’s head and took a small step forward.

“Nagisa-chan, I’m glad you seem to have such a good classmate.”

The wind blew, sending Shizuma’s hair whirling, further hiding her expression. “It looks like you won’t have any trouble finding someone to recommend you.”

The wind rustled through the trees. Suddenly the cold of early spring pervaded the area.

“Someone to recommend me?” Nagisa repeated with a questioning look on her face.

“Yes. Someone to recommend you for entry. *L’Ouverture brillante* is going to be at the end of the month, you know.” Shizuma’s low voice echoed from within the increasing evening shadows.

Chiyo went pale. “*La... L’Ouverture brillante?* Do you mean—”

“I-I’ve just now decided.” Shizuma abruptly straightened and spun around to face Nagisa.

“Shizuma-oneesama...”

Chiyo’s and Tamao’s voices overlapped. Chiyo was frozen and Tamao went bright red.

“I am going to enter the *Étoile* competition this year with Nagisa as my partner,” Shizuma said. She walked back to Nagisa, determined, and looked dolefully into Nagisa’s face. “I would have been happy just to spend some time with you; I really don’t want to get you wrapped up in something like this.”

She stroked Nagisa’s head again and then gently placed her hand against Nagisa’s cheek. “But...” She spread her fingers. “You’re going to have to understand, okay?”

Her thumb and index finger squeezed closed. She pinched Nagisa’s cheek.

“Didn’t I tell you? If you break your promise...” Shizuma slowly leaned close to Nagisa’s ear and whispered, “I’ll punish you.”

Aah, but...weren’t you just talking about calling you “Shizuma-oneesama?”

Overwhelmed by the pain in her cheek—or by Shizuma-oneesama’s intensity—Nagisa couldn’t put her thoughts into words.

“I am Hanazono Shizuma from St. Miator Girls’ Academy, Sixth Year, Snow Class. As someone who has lived on this campus a long time, and has worn the shining *Étoile* crown once already, I will never play second fiddle to anyone. Ever.”

Shizuma slapped Tamao’s hand off of the edge of Nagisa’s skirt. “I’ve only just met you, and I didn’t even think of this before—it looks like I was soft. There are plenty of traps waiting for good seeds that have just been planted. Even a good seed can be eaten by a bird if it falls on the edge of the path. If it falls among the rocks, it dries up. If it falls among thorns, it gets choked. But...”

She glared at Tamao with icy eyes.

Tamao felt something cold run down her spine. *I wonder... I wonder how long it's been since I've seen Shizuma-oneesama act like this.*

Shizuma was filled with a dignified elegance and an intensity that seemed like it would overpower Tamao. It was like she was wrapped in a silent flame. A cold, silvery, soundless flame.

“A seed that falls on good ground will produce thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown, growing thickly laden with fruit in the good ground. I must let everyone know that this good seed² is mine, and...for this good seed, the good ground is me, Hanazono Shizuma.”

Shizuma gazed steadily at Nagisa and gently extended her hand.

Ah! This gentle, noble hand that seems like it belongs to a goddess. Nagisa couldn't help wondering how happy she would be if she took that hand. It was like the entrance to a dazzling other world, like a gateway to a land of bliss, a world flowing with milk and honey—an inviting hand that no normal person could refuse.

Shizuma gave a gentle smile from the bottom of her heart, one that looked sympathetic. “Nagisa. You didn't know, so I will forgive you. But I'm going to tell you right now, so be sure to remember. I am a good oneesama to everyone who lives in Miator. But this is what it *really* means to call me 'oneesama.' I will not allow you, my beloved *cadette*, to fall into another's hands again. As a sign of our promise, let's take the title of *Étoile* together. I, Hanazono Shizuma, promise you the crown of miracles.”

Shizuma's face lowered—and drew close to Nagisa's lips.

Nagisa blanked out.

What is this all about? What in the world is going on here?! Staring dumbfounded at Shizuma, whose hair was shrouding Nagisa and blocking Tamao's view of her, Tamao couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Could Shizuma-oneesama possibly be serious...?

Tamao had come to Miator directly from the elementary school. For good or bad, she'd thought she knew almost everything about this oneesama who was two years her elder. Tamao, an outstanding beauty who was always

number one or two in her class, had even set her eyes on Shizuma once, and there had been many times when the two of them had worked together at functions such as Masses.

Shizuma was the prettiest girl in the school, and talented. Not only that, she knew how to make good use of her beauty to enjoy her school life to the fullest. Tamao secretly felt a bond with her.

Compared to what Tamao knew of Shizuma, this didn't seem like her normal behavior. Chasing and chasing and running down her prey—driving the girl she sought to the very edge of a cliff and then finally getting her to jump into Shizuma's arms of her own volition. She had heard that was Shizuma's usual method, and that's how she had imagined it to be, not this twisting of someone's arm, forcing her.

Getting someone to do what you want of her own will was the epitome of a white lily's love.

This, however... It's because Nagisa-chan is so cute. Because she's so normal. Because I teased her a little—right in front of Shizuma's own eyes. I wonder if she's serious? She actually wants to become the Étoile together?

It didn't matter that Shizuma-oneesama was so popular she had easily won the title of *Étoile* last year. Her partner was a transfer student who had only come here this month. There was no way such a ridiculous idea would succeed. There were only three weeks left until the first competition of the *Étoile* series, *L'Ouverture brillante*.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

The sound of dignified applause echoed from nearby.

"Wonderful—this is exactly what we expected from our Shizuma-oneesama!" With a rustle, someone appeared out of the shadows.

"Who's there?!" Shizuma asked.

While Tamao and Chiyo stared in astonishment, St. Miator's Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki, appeared, looking her usual calm self.

"Miyuki-oneesama! What are you doing here?" Tamao yelled.

“Oh my, what a coincidence, isn’t it? The joint Student Council meeting ran late today, so I was taking a shortcut...” Miyuki put a leisurely smile on her face. Tamao was going to say something else, but Miyuki didn’t even look at her. She stared straight ahead, looking only at Shizuma.

“And I see I came at the perfect time, Shizuma-oneesama. If I am not mistaken about what I just heard, you are going to enter this year’s *Étoile* competition with this transfer student, Aoi Nagisa from Fourth Year Moon Class—am I correct?”

Chiyo’s mouth fell open. “Whaaat? Miyuki-oneesama, were you listening the whole time?!”

Miyuki didn’t even look at the shocked Chiyo; she merely silenced her with a gesture of the hand. “Splendid! Truly splendid determination!”

She clapped her hands again. “As president of Miator’s Student Council, nothing could make me happier. Actually, there was a bit of an incident at the joint Student Council meeting just held at Spica. You simply must hear about it, Shizuma-oneesama.”

Miyuki told them what had happened at the meeting. How Spica was so confident in one of their candidates, Otori Amane. How they seemed to think they had already won the *Étoile* crown. How Miyuki and the other Miator students present at the meeting had been frustrated when they heard it.

And about how Spica’s Tomori Shion had provoked them and given them the sign of challenge, as if she were saying “If you think you can win, then go ahead and try!”

“Lulim’s Council President, Minamoto, seemed to be supporting Spica, too. Shizuma-sama, you must understand how we in Miator’s Student Council felt when we heard that.” Miyuki’s voice became tearful.

“I know what you’re trying to say,” Shizuma said in a low voice, still holding Nagisa in her arms. For some reason, Nagisa hadn’t uttered a word since Miyuki had showed up.

“Thank you very much,” was all Miyuki said.

Shizuma let out a huge sigh, mixed with considerable sorrow. She lovingly

looked at Nagisa in her arms.

Tamao was shocked at the look in her eyes. The usually confident and cheerful Shizuma couldn't say a thing—she seemed to be feeling both heart-wrenching sadness and kindness at the same time.

“Tamao, please take care of Nagisa-chan and Chiyo-chan,” Shizuma said without shifting her gaze. With a thwump, she gave Nagisa's immobile body over to Tamao.

For the first time, Tamao realized the state Nagisa was in. *Oh no! What happened to you, Nagisa?!*

Shizuma gave Miyuki a look. “Let's go.”

Miyuki bowed deeply and said in a small voice, “Well then, let's go through the formalities as quickly as possible. The entry sheets are in the Student Council office.”

The two of them left, walking quickly.

Shizuma, her silvery hair fluttering behind her, disappeared into the dark shadows of the trees.

“Tamao-oneesama, I wonder what's going on with Shizuma-oneesama,” Chiyo said nervously after a long silence.

“I'm sure Shizuma-oneesama is—” Tamao started to say, but stopped. “I don't know, either. But right now, I have our Nagisa-chan on my hands.”

She looked at Nagisa's face. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing regularly.

Goodness, I wonder when she fell asleep! I've never seen a girl so stunned by Shizuma-oneesama's kiss!

A totally peaceful feeling came over Tamao. “It's impossible for us to understand what the upperclass oneesama are thinking. But that's okay, Chiyo-chan, because we're with Nagisa-chan. Let's go back to the Strawberry Dorms, all three of us. We're already late, so let's take our time and pick flowers along the way. It's all right, I'll think of an excuse to give the nuns. I'm sure there won't be any problem if we mention the Student Council

President, Miyuki-oneesama. Besides, we actually were with her. Knowing her, I'm sure she'll match her story with ours."

"Right!" Chiyo looked at Tamao trustingly, then peeked at Nagisa's face. "Ah! Oh, Nagisa-oneesama... It looks like she's fallen completely asleep! And she looks happy!"

"You're right. She looks so innocent when she's sleeping, just like a little child," Tamao said with a laugh. She shook Nagisa awake. "Come on, wake up. Wake up, Nagisa-chan! It's time to go home! I'm sure there's delicious cake and tea waiting at the Strawberry Dorms! Wake up, my cute little Nagisa-chan! If you don't wake up, I'll tickle your stomach!"

The wind blew, swaying Nagisa's hair. Her eyelids twitched. From somewhere, a sweet flowery scent, like that of a tropical island, drifted over them.

Chatter chatter chatter chatter...

The halls of the Strawberry Dorms rippled with the noise of the pre-dinner bustle. Groups of girls laughed happily, telling each other about what had happened that day and talking about their plans for that night before each went her own way.

In a hall deep in the Miator section of the Strawberry Dorms was a public corner with shared facilities, like the dining hall and salon. It was the farthest corner of the hall and had a stone floor with a gray mosaic pattern. There was also a large wooden door made of oak.

A girl, passing by, looked at it, puzzled. "Huh? The common bath is closed? It looks like there's light coming from inside. Did someone mention we couldn't get in the bath before dinner tonight?"

Swsssh.

A watery sound, like a wave, echoed from the other side of the thick white steam. Miator's large common bath was designed in the Roman style, with

large, bright terra cotta tiles. Three large goddess statues, each holding a vase, stood around the bathtub, which was big enough for thirty people. Streams of water flowed from the vases. Water that spilled out of the tub calmly flowed over the floor.

“Phew, what a nice bath,” whispered one girl, her long hair pulled up as she soaked in the tub.

“It sure is,” replied another girl with short black hair and a slightly nervous look on her face. “Two people hardly ever get a chance to use this huge tub by themselves.”

The serious voice belonged to Rokujo Miyuki.

The other girl laughed and turned around. “Oh my.” She chuckled inwardly. “You don’t have to be so sarcastic. What’s wrong with doing a little mischief once in a while?”

That was Hanazono Shizuma—even through the steam, it was clear her face was as beautiful as the goddess sculptures around the tub.

Miyuki puffed out her cheeks and blew out a slow breath. “Thanks to a certain someone it seems I have quite a few *more* things to do now.”

Plunk.

Shizuma drew closer to Miyuki. “I wanted to take it easy. Didn’t we used to talk secretly like this a lot before?”

Zwsssh... Water overflowed.

“Yes—until a year ago.”

“A year? Has it been that long? No, I mean, is that all that has passed? It feels like much, much longer. And at the same time feels like just the other day.”

“Yes,” was Miyuki’s short reply. Shizuma sat in front of her, facing her.

“Oh, you think so too, Miyuki? Heh heh. You know, you are the only one I can talk with about back then, Miyuki.”

“This is the first time you’ve talked about it, Shizuma-sama,” Miyuki

replied with a serious face.

And the first time you've smiled so brightly, she thought.

"Oh, it is?" Shizuma chuckled as if she didn't know what Miyuki was talking about.

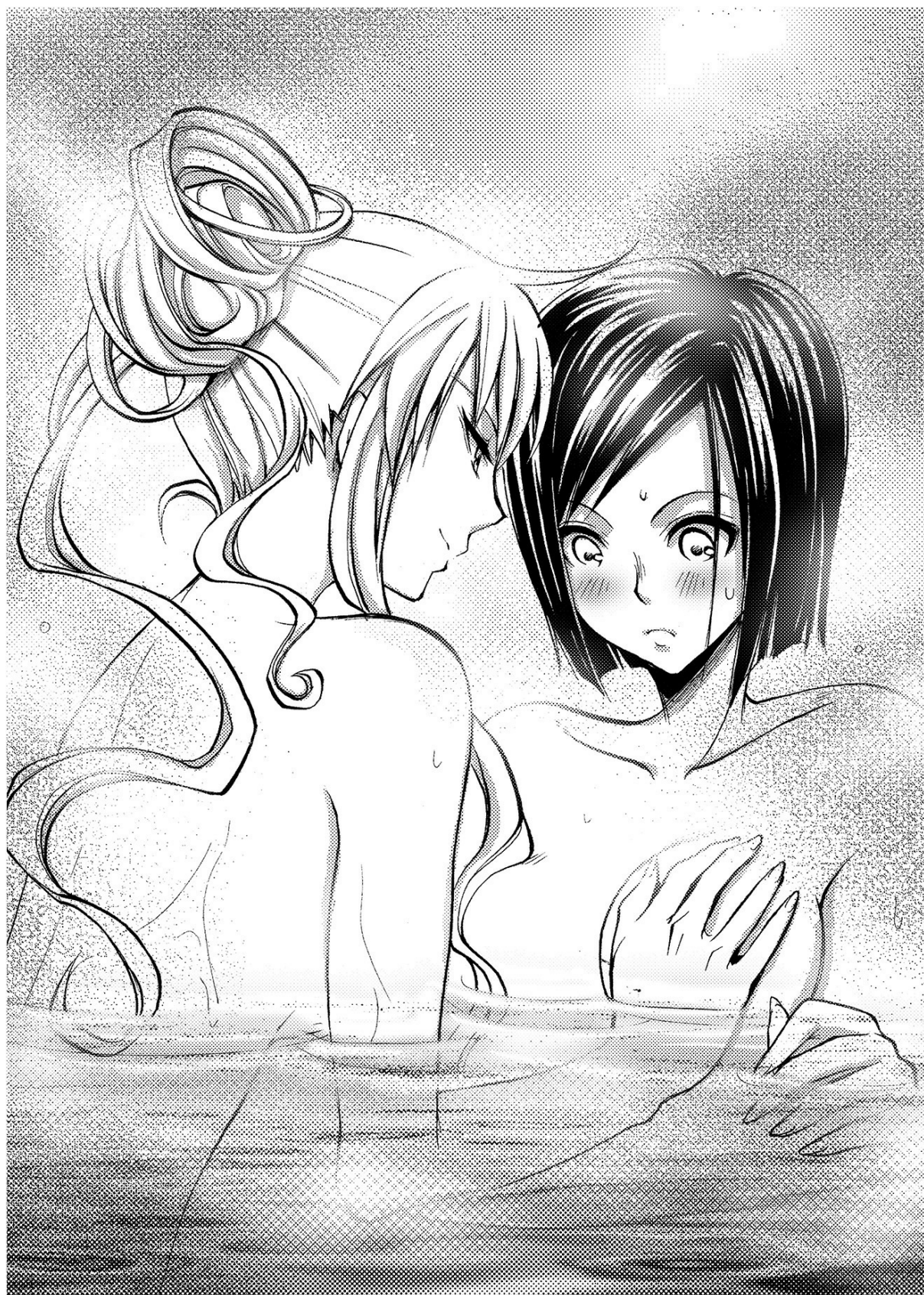
Now that I think about it, I guess it has been a very long time since I've felt so carefree, so cheerful. I feel like something good is waiting for me. It makes me want to do something really showy. It's a feeling of excitement I have about the future—something I'd forgotten.

"Since it was you, Miyuki, I was positive—I knew you would sense my mood and catch on. And the way you pretended to cry—even Tamao was fooled, don't you think? I'm impressed. But I knew from the beginning there was no way you were going to give up on the *Étoile* competition. Of course, I had absolutely no desire to enter, but..." Shizuma moved right next to Miyuki. She brought her face so close to Miyuki's their cheeks almost touched. "It's all right. I'll go along with it. Just this once."

"Shizuma-sama! I didn't mean to—"

The moment she started to speak, Shizuma's supple fingers dug into the bulge of Miyuki's soft breast.

"It's all right. Our interests happen to be the same this time." Shizuma smirked, lowered her voice even more and said, "You look lovely naked, Miyuki-chan."



Shizuma passed Miyuki, walked to the edge of the tub and stood with a loud rush of water.

The steam lifted and Miyuki unconsciously averted her eyes. The sight of Shizuma standing there openly, stark naked, was too— —sublime.

Miyuki tried to play it cool. “If you’d like, shall I rinse you off?”

Shizuma turned only her head turned to look back. “No, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

Miyuki blushed, even though her eyes were still averted.

“Oh, are you getting hot flashes from staying in the bath too long? Your cheeks are bright red, Miyuki-chan,” Shizuma said, almost as if she was talking to herself. She chuckled and left to rinse herself off.

Shizuma disappeared beyond the steam.

Aaah... That was scary. Shizuma-sama sure is intense when it's one-on-one. Having managed to somehow withstand Shizuma’s pursuit, Miyuki stroked her breast. She suddenly sympathized, just a little, with the transfer student Shizuma had her eye on.

“Hey, hey! Tamao-chan!” Nagisa was a little excited. *Today was—how do I put this—a dazzling day.*

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Come on!” she called. It had been a week since Nagisa had started sharing a room with Tamao. Usually Tamao would answer right away, and she’d always be concerned about whatever it was Nagisa wanted to talk about—but now there was no answer.

“Hey! Hey! Is this how you use a facial mask?” Nagisa turned from the mirror.

“Ha! Heh heh heh heh heh heh.”

Tamao, who had been sitting by her bed absent-mindedly combing her hair, burst into laughter. “Oh, what am I going to do with you, Nagisa-chan... Ha, heh heh heh heh.”

“Huh? It’s not right, is it? When I put it on, my eyes get plugged up and I can’t see.”

Nagisa sensed Tamao was coming closer.

“Silly, it’s absurd to wear it like that. The parts for your eyes need to be open. There are eye holes sewn into it, you know? Look.”

Tamao’s cool hands flitted about over Nagisa’s head, and...

Nagisa’s vision became clear. “Oh, I can see. There *are* spots for the eyes... but even the eye parts were covered in beauty cream, so I thought this was how I was supposed to use it...”

The facial mask with beauty cream on it that Tamao had given her was cool and felt good.

“If you wear it like that, the cream will get in your eyes. Are you okay? Do they hurt?” Tamao took Nagisa’s face in her hand and took a long look into her eyes. Nagisa’s desk light reflected and sparkled in Tamao’s large eyes.

“Yeah, I’m all right. Tamao-chan, your eyes are twinkling.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Tamao looked off to the side embarrassedly, which was not like her at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry...” *I have a habit of saying exactly what I think, don’t I.*

Nagisa felt a little guilty about it, but at the same time she was surprised by the silent, embarrassed Tamao.

For the past week, after eating dinner, they had been going to the salon together. Even when they were in their room, they would do something fun—play a little game, do crafts, eat delicious snacks. Tamao had arranged all of it to cheer Nagisa up. This was the first time Nagisa had seen her quiet like she was tonight.

“What’s wrong? You seem kind of down, Tamao-chan.”

“I seem down? Not at all! I’m cheerful as ever,” Tamao replied with a big smile. She fussed with the hem of her white negligée and went back to her own bed.

Nagisa didn't believe it. *She really is acting strange.* Normally, Tamao would shout something like "I'm so happy you're worried about me, Nagisa-chan!" and give Nagisa an enthusiastic hug.

Oh no. What am I thinking? Since when did I start thinking about things like that? It-it's not like I'm E-EXPECTING it!! Swiping the naughty idea away with her hand, Nagisa stood up.

Tamao sighed.

"Come on, what's wrong?! You're acting strange today. If you want, you can talk to me about it."

"It's all right. If I told you, it wouldn't help anyway."

"Oh, not at all? Well, I've only just transferred here, but I think I've started to get used to Miator."

"Then...Shizuma must have taught you a lot in one day!"

"It-it's not like that..." Nagisa said with a blush. "It's thanks to you of course, Tamao-chan, because you've been so nice to me since my first day here. Oh, now that I think about it, Shizuma-sama—no, I mean Shizuma-oneesama—suddenly disappeared this evening. I wonder what happened. Do you know, Tamao-chan?"

"Oh, come on, Nagisa-chan—you don't remember?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"But..." Tamao's mouth opened and closed soundlessly for a while and then stopped. *She was even kissed, for goodness sake.*

"Well, whatever. I suppose it's more convenient that you forget."

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

"Don't worry about it. It's none of your concern. Shizuma-oneesama left because she had sudden business with the Student Council President."

"With the Student Council President?! Wow, Shizuma-oneesama really is an important person after all. She even goes to the Student Council... Wait—but, if she's the oneesama that all the schools admire the most, why isn't

Shizuma-oneesama the Student Council President?”

“Oh, because Miator’s Student Council President is usually a fifth-year student, who wouldn’t be studying for entrance exams yet. And last year when Shizuma-oneesama was a fifth-year student, she was the *Étoile*.”

“*Étoile*? Now that you mention it, I think Shizuma-oneesama said something about that once. Exactly what is an *Étoile* anyway? Is it some sort of job within the Student Council?”

“You don’t know what the *Étoile* is? Well...it’s a little difficult to explain.”

Tamao’s face clouded as she tried to think of the best way to explain it to Nagisa. “You could say the *Étoile* is the symbol of this school—no, not just this school. The symbol for all of Astraea. One is picked each year, from all of the students. She is the kind of person who is the object of everyone’s admiration, the target of their love and affection and a model to the other students. It’s different from the usual beauty contest, because it doesn’t focus as much on looks as it does on being loved by all the students in all three schools. It’s not just one person who is picked; it’s always a couple. The couples are formed voluntarily, but usually it’s an oneesama type, like Shizuma, paired with a smart little sister type. They are a symbol—a model of how to care for each other and love each other as sisters. In reality, there are some couples who really do love each other, and some who are couples in name only, formed just because they look like model students together.”

Tamao got a distant look in her eyes. “The *Étoile* is decided by three competitions, one each month for three months, beginning in April when the new school year begins. There is a coronation before first-term Ending Ceremonies. After summer vacation, there are many things she must take part in, like giving the opening speech at important events like the Culture Festival. So if the process of choosing the *Étoile* has begun, you will probably see her too, Nagisa-chan. She does not have the authority to decide anything substantial, so you could say it is an honorary position, but...it is a meaningful, almost royal position.”

“Hmm, I see. I think I understand now. It’s such an incredible position that you even speak more solemnly when you talk about it.”

“Oh no, I always speak like that when I discuss the upperclass onesama. But...you might be right, in a way. The person wearing the sacred crown of the *Étoile* is...how do I put this? It’s like she’s endowed with an indescribable, noble light that seems to have a magic spell cast on it. No one who lives on this hill can help but love and respect her. Shizuma-onesama is beautiful and full of confidence, and she is a wonderful person. However, when she was the *Étoile*, she truly shone. No one could help but be fascinated by her. Everyone wanted to get close to her. She was like a goddess.”

Wow—in my eyes, she seems like a goddess right now. Nagisa tried with all her might to imagine Shizuma when she had been the *Étoile*. Next she tried adding Shizuma’s partner standing beside her. But it was beyond the limits of her imagination.

When she glanced to the side, she noticed Tamao’s eyes shone with ecstasy. For some reason, Nagisa felt like she understood Tamao’s feelings.

“Hey Tamao-chan, don’t you want to try to become the *Étoile*? I think you would win for sure. Yeah, I’d definitely cheer for you!”

Tamao sprang up in a panic. “N-no, not at all! Someone like me would only disgrace the title of *Étoile*. Besides, I’m still in my fourth year. And this year, there is a great prince who attends Spica. Everyone thinks there’s no doubt this year’s *Étoile* is going to be Prince Amane.”

“A great prince?!”

“Yes. A prince so great even the girls at Miator think we might not have a chance this year.”

“You say prince, but...it’s a girl, right?” Nagisa asked.

“Heh... Oh, Nagisa-chan. You are still so innocent! Yes, of course she is a female. But I think even you would understand the instant you saw her. No matter how you look at her, there is no doubt she is a prince.”

“Hmmm... Oh, I see... I want to see her right now!”

“Oh, Nagisa-chan, you cheater! I’ll tell Shizuma-onesama on you!” Tamao raised her hand in jest. “Oh, that might become another big problem...”

Nagisa imagined it and was a little disheartened, but for some reason it also made her very excited.

“I think you’d better go to sleep,” Tamao said.

Reluctantly Nagisa turned toward her bed. “W-wait, I still have the facial mask on.”

“It’s all right. I’ll watch over you until you fall asleep, and when the time comes I’ll take it off for you.”

“But I should do it!”

“No, no, if I left it up to you, Nagisa-chan, you would do something weird again and wake me up!”

“I don’t care what you say, I’ll be fine! All that’s left is to take it off.”

“Quiet! If you complain, I’ll get into the bed with you!”

“Urgh...okay,” she said. Wondering why Tamao was being so threatening over something so small, Nagisa got into bed. *Well, whatever.* Too much had happened today, and Nagisa was a little panicked.

If tomorrow is like this too, oh, it makes my head hurt, but...I still feel kind of happy. God, does that make me strange?

Five minutes later...

“Hey, Nagisa-chan, it’s so boring, watching you like this, so...can I sleep next to you after all?”

Tamao suddenly invaded Nagisa’s bed.

“Whoa! Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa! Tamao-chan, you’re too close!”

The silk of Tamao’s negligée rustled against Nagisa’s cheek and she smelled the gentle scent of soap.

Yargh! Whatever! Anyway, may tomorrow be a good day as well!

Even though Tamao had forced her way into Nagisa’s bed, when Nagisa looked at her, for some reason she felt kind toward her.

“Well then, fine. Let’s sleep together tonight! It’s warmer that way!”

“...Nagisa-chan.”

The early spring day at Miator finally came to an end. To Nagisa, the *Étoile* was really nothing more than a star in space, shining in the distance.

Chapter 3

The White Prince of the Stars Falls in Love with a Violet on the Roadside

“It’s the Prince!”

“The Prince!”

“The Prince has graced us with her presence!”

The girls’ murmurs spread like ripples. They stood in front of the main gate of St. Spica Girls’ Institute, which shone in the white morning sunlight. They were there to see the main event of the morning—the arrival of the Prince of the Stars.

The girls, all wearing uniforms of pure white, which they called “Spica White,” stood in two lines in front of the main gate. With the same anticipation in each of their hearts, all of their cheeks pink, they fidgeted with excitement. The aisle between the two lines looked like a glorious path up to a stage.

Around the corner of the path stood a person in anguish.

Aah, my head is spinning—even though I should be used to it by now. It happens every morning. Why must it be like this every time I go to school? I feel like I’m going through intense scrutiny—though I should be used to it by now. Do I have no choice but to walk up this path? Just like this, forever?

Otori Amane sighed from the depths of her heart.

Diiing dooong.

The sound of old bells echoed distantly from the direction of Maiden Park. It was the first bell, signaling that it was 8:15.

Not again.

She took a reluctant step forward.

“It’s almost time!”

“She will be here soon!”

Amane almost always arrived at the school gate just past 8:00. And if the Prince couldn’t find the resolve to appear early, the girls who waited for her stayed planted in that spot, even until this late time. They did it every morning.

The young ladies waited anxiously, their hearts swelling in anticipation of the moment she would finally step into view.

Oh well, there’s nothing I can do. I have to go, Amane told herself desperately.

“Good morning!” She forced out the greeting in a strong, dignified voice. At that moment, Amane’s face turned into that of a prince. She was completely unaware of this, but she was so used to the role she had played for so many years, it was already a part of her. Her role as Prince of the Campus.

The girls who waited trembled with joy as they greeted their Prince.

“Good morning to you.”

“How is your health this morning?”

“May God’s divine protection be upon you today, Amane-sama.”

As each girl gave the greeting she had spent all morning thinking about, she took the edge of her skirt in her fingers and curtsied. It was a Western form of reverence—pinching the edge of the already short skirt of Spica’s uniform and forcing it to spread a little, drawing the right leg toward the back and bending it and lowering the body as if kneeling. Then slowly, elegantly, bowing the head.

If Spica’s uniform were black instead of white, and if they were wearing white caps on their heads, the girls would look exactly like maids serving a prince.

As Amane passed, a wave of beautiful curtsies flowed down the lines of girls, like a wave among spectators at a sporting event. The only sound was the rustling of clothes.

It was an elegant sight, without a single thing out of place. The very person for whom all this spectacle was put forth, who could be expected to lord it over those who showered her with affection, actually kept her eyes directly ahead as she walked, because she didn't want to see any of it.

Around the same time Amane reached the end of the lines, one girl from the very end walked gracefully to the center.

"Aaaaaaaa-Amane-sama!" The girl was so nervous, she had difficulty speaking.

Amane looked firmly into the other girl's eyes. "Yes?" Amane was strong as she prepared herself and stepped forward.

Now that it's come to this, I don't have a choice. Just like always, they'll release me after this.

"Uuuuuuumm, umm, umm..." The young lady was so nervous she felt like she had to go to the bathroom. But she squeezed her thighs tight and endured it.

"What?" Amane asked with a good-natured tilt of her head. Her voice was slightly husky, low and mellow. Her bangs hung over her forehead and her eyes shone faintly in their shadow.

But her gentleness had the exact opposite effect from what she'd wanted.

"Uh, umm..." The young lady looked like she was just about to faint.

I guess I have no choice. Nothing's going to happen if we stay here like this.

In a calm voice, Amane asked her, "Did you have something to give to me?"

"Y-y-y-y-y-yes!" In one of the young lady's hands was a small package tied with a golden ribbon. She was holding it so tightly the paper it was wrapped in was completely wrinkled.

This happened every morning, and it had come out of something Amane herself had said. Before this spectacle had come to be, underclassmen would visit Amane's room one by one every morning. Blushing nervously, in small voices, they would tell her why they had come to visit. Not only would they not be able to get up the courage to give her the present they'd brought, but

they would clutch it so tightly they'd leave wrinkles in the wrapping paper.

Because of these attacks, which had waited for her every time she'd opened her door to go to school, every time she'd turned a corner in the hallways, Amane was always late.

So she had made a request. The proclamation was called the "Adonis decree" among Amane fans. From that point on, waiting for Amane-sama was permitted only in the morning when she arrived at school, as a group at the front gate.

And only one person was permitted to give her a gift.

The truth was, Amane didn't want a single present. She didn't want them to wait for her arrival, either. But if she told them that she would be rebuked by the current Spica Student Council President, Tomori Shion.

"If you say that, a lot of girls will try to get a jump on everyone else, and you'll be bothered even more, you know? Forbidding your fans from doing ANYTHING isn't a good plan. I think it will be better to plan an escape route. Pressure cookers always need a proper release valve."

Amane had been impressed. It was just like the enterprising Student Council President to think of something like that. Shion was known in some circles as the Snow Queen. From Amane's point of view, the girl was energetic, a person of action. But she placed impossible demands on Amane and made Amane do exactly what she most didn't want to do—and do it over and over again.

Shion is a lot prettier and more adorable than me.

Amane thought about the Student Council President's long brown hair and her incomparable forehead above her beautiful face.

Why me?

To Amane, it was almost inconceivable that the underclassmen would be drawn to her androgynous looks. Her tallness, her short haircut, her gallant expression and her masculine way of speaking—she couldn't understand how people could be attracted to those things.

It was just chance she happened to be tall. Her hair was short because it was more convenient for riding her horse. She was always alone because dealing with the other girls was a pain. She was embarrassed every time they exclaimed she was “wonderful!” Instead of talking to other girls, she enjoyed talking to her beloved horse.

To Amane, this was just the ordinary truth.

I don't have a fan mentality, but if I were them, I would've become the fan of a much cuter girl.

The image of a certain girl came to Amane's mind. *She's...not like that at all.* Amane's thought denied her previous one. *Now that I think about it, if I look back to before the “decree,” when I was still getting a mountain of presents every day, this is definitely much better—I just hope today's gift doesn't have sweet cookies in it again.*

As she accepted the package, Amane was a little absent-minded. Her hand lightly brushed the other girl's hand.

“Ah! Aaaaaaaah!”

The young lady fainted with a spectacular flopping sound.

“Amazing...” murmured Konohana Hikari, from St. Spica Girls' Institute's Third Year Class *Un*. Her shiny hair, which was twisted into curls that fell to her slender shoulders, gleamed in the morning light. Even her delicate features, which usually held a forlorn expression, were filled with an unusual radiance this morning.

She held her overly large bag protectively to her thin upper body. Today was Hikari's true school debut. She was still just a little embarrassed about wearing a miniskirt, but she was getting used to it. She still walked a little pigeon-toed, which was probably a habit.

Six months had passed since she had transferred to the school. She'd heard rumors about the lines that greeted Amane-sama in the morning. This was the first time she had actually seen it, because until today Hikari had been coming in earlier than the other students in order to go to special

early-morning lectures given especially for transfer students.

I...I never knew she was incredible enough to deserve THIS.

She stood in a corner of the entrance to the school building, her eyes glued to the spectacle in front of her, and her heart trembled ever so slightly. Romantic feelings for this beautiful, extraordinary person, and the feeling she was out of place at that moment...

I wonder if meeting her alone back then was just a convenient dream.

“They’re Amane-sama wannabes,” said a mellow voice next to her.

Hikari turned around. “Oh! Yaya-chan!”

Nanto Yaya, who was in her class, stood there proudly and tossed her perfectly straight, supple hair. The uniform’s miniskirt suited her well; it seemed to accentuate her glamorous physique. Her slightly tilted eyes and parted lips were alluring. From the first time Hikari had seen Yaya, she couldn’t believe the girl could possibly be in the same year as her. And this morning, as always, Yaya looked like a sultry woman.

“Heh heh heh. Good morning, Hikari-chan. You look as cute as ever today!”

“Th-thanks...” Hikari looked down, her cheeks red, remembering what had happened in the library. *It was so embarrassing when she tried to see if my panties were provocative enough!*

Yaya looked at Hikari with a satisfied expression and said, “Hikari-chan, your special lectures are finally over, right? I’m so happy! From now on, let’s walk to school together! It doesn’t take much time to go from the Strawberry Dorms to school, but I want to be with you every little bit I can. Besides, I can’t go with Amane-oneesama. So it’s all right with you, right? Heh heh heh heh heh heh.”

Completely ignoring Hikari’s reaction, Yaya took Hikari’s arm as if it were perfectly natural and smiled.

“Yeah,” Hikari answered in a slightly gloomy voice. Her eyes were rooted on Amane, who still held the student who had screamed and fainted. She was yelling for someone to take the poor girl to the nurse’s office.

“Are you really that worried about those Amane-sama wannabes?” Yaya asked in a disappointed voice.

“N-not at all! But what do you mean, ‘Amane-sama wannabes?’” Hikari obviously hesitated to ask, but apparently just couldn’t help herself.

Hikari’s anxious expression made Yaya shiver a little bit. *You’re cute even when you’re anxious, Hikari-chan. I had the same thought back in the library too, but you just make me want to tease you.*

“It’s like...Amane-sama’s fan club, I suppose,” Yaya said bluntly. “She used to have something like official bodyguards, but as Amane-oneesama got older, the number of her fans grew and they couldn’t handle it. The organization was disbanded and split into too many groups to count. At the request of Amane-oneesama herself, her fans are only allowed to have an audience with her in the morning at the school gate.”

As she said this, Yaya raised the hand holding her bag and pointed to Amane, who was leaning over the girl in her arms and looking into her face to see whether she were okay.

“Oh no, it looks like they’re kissing!”

Huh? When Hikari turned around to look, she could definitely see what Yaya was talking about. From Hikari’s angle, though, their two faces were still definitely separated. What she did see was that the girl’s face was bright red and she looked like she was so overwhelmed with joy she felt she could fly.

Hikari averted her eyes, her heart quivering. *Twinge twinge.*

My chest kind of hurts.

“So now people who call themselves Amane-oneesama fans are generally called Amane-sama wannabes,” Yaya continued indifferently. “Of course, they don’t have a membership certificate or anything, but there seem to be a lot of people who wear a white lace ribbon choker as a symbol that they ‘serve the Prince.’ I guess you could say their image is a little maid-like?”

She suddenly turned to face Hikari. “What are you going to do? Do you want to try wearing a white choker like the wannabes, Hikari-chan? It looks

like you can make it as elaborate as you want. I think it would look good on you, Hikari-chan. It has a slave feel to it. I'm sure it would be wonderful!"

Yaya brought her face close to Hikari's. It seemed like she'd read Hikari's mind completely.

The look in Yaya's eyes was bright. Hikari instinctively turned away.

"N-not at all... Besides, I'm still just a new transfer student. I don't even know Amane-sama very well."

"Oh, that doesn't matter at all! Most of the girls lined up over there probably haven't ever spoken a single word to Amane-oneesama, you know? Compared to them, Amane-oneesama loves you so much, Hikari-chan. Aah, I just don't know what to do! Which one should I be jealous of? The beautiful Amane-oneesama, or Hikari-chan, who's loved by the beautiful Amane-oneesama?"

Yaya writhed like she was in agony, just to poke fun at Hikari.

"N-not at all! Me, loved by her? You're exaggerating!" But at that moment, Hikari remembered just a little bit about that night. She felt airy and happy. That night, she had felt like she was floating on a rose-colored cloud.

It was an episode that had completely changed Hikari's idea of what her life would be like at St. Spica, so much so that it had made Hikari feel as if they had probably been destined to meet.

The Strawberry Dorms were a facility that served as a dormitory for the three schools: St. Miator Girls' Academy, St. Spica Girls' Institute and St. Lulim Girls' School. It was located across from St. Spica, almost directly behind Astraea Hill, in a corner of the eastern edge of Maiden Park.

The Strawberry Dorms were built to look as if a rectangular building had been cut to form an equilateral triangle shape. The center was a courtyard. The three buildings were separated according to school: a Miator dorm, a Spica dorm and a Lulim dorm. Each was independent, the dorms only connected by three skywalks that passed over the courtyard, which it gave the girls a slight thrill to cross. Their nickname was the Bell Walkways.

In the Strawberry Dorms, going between the different schools' dorms was forbidden. In order to go to the dorm of a different school, a student needed to get permission from the dorm mother. That was why the Bell Walkways started at the second level, close to the dorm mothers' rooms, which jutted out above the front entranceways located in the center of each of the dorms like lookout points.

The stairs that led to the walkways were built to be hidden, and the entrance to each walkway, which abruptly appeared in the stairwell wall, seemed as strange as one of Escher's optical-illusion pictures and gave them an atmosphere of forbiddenness.

When a student crossed one of the Bell Walkways, she rang a large bell by the entranceway and gave her name.

"St. Spica Girls' Institute, Third Year, Class *Un*, Konohana Hikari, passing through."

A student was supposed to perform this ritual in order to clear people from the walkway. No one knew exactly what purpose it served or when it started, but it was a strict rule of the strange Bell Walkways.

Hikari had been crying. Looking back on it now, she had probably been homesick. Several days had passed since Hikari had come to St. Spica Girls' Institute and started living in the Strawberry Dorms.

She was the only new student who had transferred into Spica that year.

In the Spica dorm, new transfer students stayed in a one-person room for the first two weeks.

The nun who had showed Hikari around was nice, and the dorm mother was kind too. The fifth-year student who was the dorm leader had seemed very wise, and Hikari felt like she wanted to get closer to her. She had treated Hikari so politely it was hard to believe she was an upperclassman.

She had said, "If there's anything you don't understand, you can ask me."

The room was of a style that gave it an air of having a long history, but it

also had a very beautiful art deco floor lamp. It was just the kind of atmosphere Hikari liked.

Of course, it was lonely being in a room all by herself, even though she had been totally fine being alone in her own room back home. In fact, she had loved being alone in that room, drinking tea and looking at her collections of beautiful illustrations.

But here...

She grabbed her favorite book from the bookshelf. Gustave Moreau. Usually, as soon as she opened the book she would be sucked right into it, captivated by the pictures. But she wasn't moved at all today.

While her mind was someplace else, a single tear fell.

Drip.

Hikari just couldn't stay still, so she left the room. Before she even realized it, Hikari stood in front of the entrance to the bell walkway. She had no reason to go to one of the other dorms, of course, but when she stood there she could see the front entrance of the Spica dorm.

The door to the outside world.

People are always coming and going from that entrance, and if the dorm mother or one of the nuns found out, I'm sure they'd worry.

When she stepped onto the Bell Walkway, she was surprised there wasn't anyone there, but it seemed like no one would notice her. There was a thick, dark peach-colored carpet on the floor of the walkway. The lie of the carpet's long fibers was beautiful, and there wasn't a trace of anyone's having walked there.

It looks like this walkway isn't used very much.

Hiding in the shadow of the wall, Hikari stared at the front entranceway.

I know standing here like this isn't going to help anything, but still... If I go out that front door, I can go home. It's not like I hate this place, but... Everyone here is wonderful, but...

Hikari felt she couldn't blend in. It was probably because of her simple, shy personality. There were a lot of refined and sophisticated students at

Spica, and they were all so dignified. Hikari felt she would be bothering them if she talked to them. She gazed at the glass entranceway below with its steel ivy growing over it and let her thoughts wander. The light from the entranceway, reflecting off the glass in front of her, began to blur.

Even though she didn't think she was that sad.

Even though there was no reason she could think of.

Drip.

Another tear fell.

Ring ring ring.

The sound of a handbell came from the entrance directly below her. In a panic, Hikari stepped back to hide against the wall.

Next came a voice. It was slightly low, mellow and dignified.

"St. Spica Girls' Institute, Fifth Year, Class *Trois*, Otori Amane, coming in!"

Hikari's heart jumped. *Oh no, she's coming this way...!*

She hurriedly looked for a better place to hide. *What do I do? There's no place to hide. It's just a walkway.*

Tmp tmp tmp. She heard the sound of someone climbing the narrow stairs to the walkway. From where Hikari was, she couldn't see the person.

Quick, quick, I have to hide somewhere!

At the end of the walkway was another school's dorm. There was no place she could go. She was trapped like a rat.

The sound of footsteps stopped.

Aaugh, what do I do... I'm going to get yelled at!

Hikari ducked her head and covered her ears. She heard someone murmur in a husky voice. "An angel...?"

Amane was on her way to Lulim's dorm. She had been called by St. Lulim's Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru.

I don't have a very good feeling about it, either—it's probably about THAT.

This year's Étoile competition. Chikaru wants to try and convince me to enter this year, I just know it. What a pain.

Even though Amane was half resigned to it, she still felt dejected over it. Chikaru was a friend; they used to go horseback riding a lot together. But she had a meddlesome personality and she worried about Amane even though she was from another school. This time Amane thought she was going too far and she should mind her own business.

The Étoile title, a beloved cadette—I don't need either of those.

Just as that thought went through her head—

Ktnk.

—There was a loud sound.

She sensed someone moving in the Bell Walkway. *Who is it?*

She felt something wrong and raised her head.

Standing there was...

An angel.

She crouched directly under a warm arc of light in the walkway, her waist-length golden hair shining, casting a halo-like ring of light above her head. Her small, pale face shone like a dream shrouded in delicate silk gauze. Her short build was adorable and her slender shoulders trembled innocently. She looked exactly like a messenger from God who had been found by a savage person on earth and been struck with surprise.

She knew they weren't really there, but Amane was certain she saw them: large, white, shining wings behind her back, spreading out above her. Peach lotus-flower petals of light fluttered down, overflowing from the heavens, church bells rang and the sound of angels' singing echoed.

An angel had descended in front of Amane.

When Hikari timidly opened her eyes—

Oh no, I squeezed my eyes shut without even realizing. I always do that. When I get scared, I end up like a turtle shut inside its shell.

The image that struck Hikari's eyes at that moment was...

The...Prince?

Amane had certainly earned her nickname. Most Spica students who saw Amane for the first time got the impression of royalty, even without knowing her or her nickname beforehand.

Before Hikari's eyes was a prince wearing a skirt.

It wasn't details like her height or her hairstyle. It was her demeanor, her very existence that told Hikari a prince had arrived. There was also the funny story that said Amane was under the "curse of the prince."

The two of them silently drew close to each other, like magnets coming together.



Hikari was dumbstruck. Up until a moment ago, her heart had been full of fear because she was in the Bell Walkway without permission, but that was completely forgotten. She was fascinated by the person who had appeared before her.

Amane thought, This is the first time I've seen such an adorable girl. She's just like an angel. It's more than her being cute... For some reason I don't understand, I feel myself strongly attracted to her. Both my body and my heart. I can't take my eyes off her.

She couldn't stand still; she began to fidget. Otori Amane, seventeen years old, experienced a sensation she had never felt before in her life. She might have been the White Prince of the Stars who was loved by everyone, but—though she didn't yet realize it—this was *her* first love.

"Are you lost?" Amane asked.

With that one question, Hikari suddenly relaxed and felt like she wanted to laugh.

Ah! Oh yeah, now that I think about it, this is a relief.

"Yes, I'm sorry... I just moved in..." The thread of tension was cut and she was able to talk smoothly.

"I see. I heard there was one transfer student this year. I guess it's you, then?"

For some reason, the fact that Amane knew about Hikari delighted her. "Yes."

"What year are you in?"

"Third."

"What class?"

"Class Un."

"What is your name?"

"Oh...Konohana Hikari."

"Hikari, huh? That's a wonderful name. It fits you well."

“Th-thank you very much.”

Their conversation faltered. Suddenly Amane said, “If you’re a transfer student, you’re still in a one-person room, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“I will show you the way.” Amane reached her hand out to Hikari.

Hikari was startled for a moment, but, for some reason, she took Amane’s hand without even a hint of shyness. Gently, elegantly, like Cinderella being invited to dance by the prince.

The two looked into each other’s eyes. Hikari felt like her body was floating, like she was in a beautiful dream. Still they gazed at each other—they couldn’t take their eyes off each other.

In a corner of this aging walkway, they had the sensation of being surrounded by a glimmering red bubble, floating away from the world together, just the two of them. They felt like they could go anywhere, holding hands, soar to limitless heights.

When Hikari saw Amane’s dark, burning eyes staring at her, her body got hot and her heart pounded. Everything in the world around Amane and Hikari seemed to shine. Hikari felt her cheeks soften, and it made her happy.

With Amane holding her hand, she walked the path to her room. Along the way, Amane talked unfalteringly about the school, still holding Hikari’s hand the whole time.

Back then, Hikari hadn’t realized how incredible that was.

Chapter 4

The Cock Crows Three Times,

an Omen of Battle

Late afternoon, St. Lulim Girls' School. Most of the students were in the bright courtyard, playing and enjoying the glorious spring sunshine, when a poster was put up on the Astraea bulletin board in the center of the yard.

"Oh, a new poster. I wonder what that could be?"

"What? Did something change?"

In this carefree moment of relaxation after lunch, girls in light pink uniforms who had been walking with their friends in groups of twos or threes went to the board, seeking something unusual to talk about.

"Oh my!"

"Ooh, now that I think about it..."

"It's that season again."

NOTICE

THE COMPETITION FOR CHOOSING

THE NEXT *ÉTOILE*

WILL COMMENCE NEXT WEEK!

Étoile • Aînée Étoile • Cadette 1 Person Each

The method of competition will be *Trois Lumières*.

The final selection and coronation
are planned for **July**.

From this point on, events related to the *Étoile* Competition will have priority over all other events and activities in all schools, so that the listed students may contend in this contest, in which lies the pride of all students in all three schools on Astraea.

– FIRST ROUND –

L'Ouverture Brillante

Month of the Virgin Mary

Held in the two days before the advent of St. Ranael

TWO DAYS PRIOR:

Cadette Competition: Undecided*

Location: Chapel Hall or Maiden Park **We are currently in the process of choosing the event. It will be posted the day of the competition.*

DAY PRIOR:

Aînée Competition: The Fortress of Promises **Location:** St. Spica Girls' Institute, Riding Grounds

—***Étoile Competition Executive Committee***

The notice was followed by a list of the seventeen couples who wished to participate in the competition. Included in the names were St. Spica Girls' Institute's Otori Amane of Fifth Year Class *Trois* and Kenjo Kaname of Fourth Year Class *Deux*. At the end of the list, the last to apply, were St. Miator Girls' Academy's Hanazono Shizuma, Sixth Year, Snow Class, and Aoi Nagisa, Fourth Year, Moon Class.

“What? The notice for the *Étoile* competition! Oh, this is that ‘Star of the Campus’ contest Remon-chan was just telling me about, right?” said a short girl reading the bulletin board, her conspicuously short, pleated pink skirt fluttering. Her short hair, pulled up in two ponytails, swayed, and a sailor collar lay on her small back. “Let’s see. St. Lulim Girls’ School has...one, two, three... Huh? Only three couples!”

The girl next to her, with her hair in buns, gave a wry smile as she automatically pushed up her glasses, which had slipped down.

“‘Star of the Campus’ contest, huh? Well, you could call it that *too*, I guess.” She scanned the bulletin board with a very curious look on her face. “*Étoile* means ‘star’ in French, and the *Étoile* competition is the event that decides

who is the most wonderful couple in Lulim, Miator and Spica, so calling it the ‘Star of the Campus’ contest would be right, but...the *Étoile*, who wins the competition that runs for three months—it starts in April when the new school year begins—is a HUGELY prestigious position! The *Étoile* always appears as the main guest at all of Astraea’s events, like the Culture Festival and the Sports Festival and Christmas. And the school that the year’s *Étoile* attends gets excited no matter what the event.”

“Hmm... It’s really that significant?” asked Hyuga Kizuna from Second Year Class B with admiration in her voice. She had just recently entered the school, so didn’t know much about it yet.

The serious girl with glasses and her hair in buns was Natsume Remon, also from St. Lulim Girls’ School Second Year Class B. She was a very common-sense type of person, but a little timid. She turned her eyes from the bulletin board, struck a triumphant pose and answered knowingly.

“That’s right! There are going to be three competitions to officially decide the *Étoile*. Each time, the couples in the lowest positions are taken out, until one couple is chosen during the last competition in July. In the meantime, there’s a fierce battle between schools, and the feeling of competition is just incredible! Even girls who say they’re not interested get caught up in all the excitement. Of course, everyone hopes her school wins. Oh, but there’s a rumor...since Prince Amane from St. Spica Girls’ Institute is entering this year, the winner has pretty much already been decided. It looks like Lulim has already given up; there aren’t many entries.” She leaned in close to check the bulletin board. “They’re saying it’s not going to be very exciting this year, but... Whoa! There really aren’t very many.

“Yeah, it sure does look like Lulim’s giving up,” said Kizuna. “It’s too bad. But you know, what you just told me is incredible! Spica has a Prince?! Wow, I really want to see! Is he blond? I wonder what country he comes from. I’ve never seen a real prince before, so I just have to...”

Just as she was about to finish her sentence...

Slap.

Someone hit her lightly on the head from behind.

“Silly, I can’t believe you said that. ‘Prince’ is just her nickname, of course. No, I guess it’s closer to a term of respect than a nickname. Just like we call our adorable second-year student Kizuna the ‘Peach-Colored Sleeping Beauty.’”

“Ah, Chikaru-oneesama!” Kizuna turned to Student Council President Minamoto Chikaru, standing behind her.

Chikaru smiled at the two of them with her strikingly kind eyes. The scent of flowers drifted from her flowing black hair with its trademark braids. The Student Council President’s sudden entrance made Remon so nervous she unconsciously blushed and rubbed her inner thigh. Kizuna, however, was completely unconcerned and left herself wide open.

“Ah! Oh yeah! I guess you’re right. I mean, why would there be a real prince here? Oh, so then Spica has a prince, even though it’s a girl! Incredible! I think I really want to see her!”

Remon timidly responded to Kizuna’s words in a modest voice. “Yeah, she’s handsome and gallant and valiant, just like a real prince! But she’s really popular, so it’s not like underclassmen from a different school, like us, have a chance to get close to her. She’s even beyond the reach of the Spica girls.”

Chikaru laughed, like she was making fun of Remon’s dreamy tone. “My, you like Amane-chan too, Remon? This is certainly unexpected.”

“Oh, n-no! N-n-n-not at all!! It’s just, umm, I saw her up close, at the opening ceremony, and I thought, ‘Wow, she has a strong aura about her.’”

Remon’s face turned bright red, her eyes immediately clouding up.

How adorable! She looks just like a little red tomato.

With that thought, Chikaru really started to enjoy herself. “Well, if you like Amane-chan that much, Remon-chan, then please cheer for her too, okay? Everyone is saying that Spica is certain to win this year’s *Étoile* competition, but it looks like the winds might have changed last week. Actually, I also think Amane-chan should be the *Étoile* once, for her own sake, so—”

“What? The winds have changed? Did something happen? Did a strong

rival candidate come from somewhere? Does this mean you will be entering, Chikaru-oneesama?!" Remon yelled. Then she was stunned speechless, her mouth hanging open.

Kizuna was completely flabbergasted. She froze with her head tilted to one side and a stunned look on her face. Her two ponytails tilted as well, one up and one down.

Chikaru gave a bitter smile.

Dear me, to think Shion-chan said that same thing to me, and now Remon-chan too—I'm so naughty. I need to be a little more careful.

She embraced Kizuna lovingly from behind. "Heh heh heh, I would be happy if that were true, but I'm sorry. Instead of wearing the lovely robes of the *Étoile* myself, I would love to place those robes on the girl I like," she said with a wink.

"I see," Remon said. "Hey, why don't all of us go to the club building together? I'm sure Kizuna-chan hasn't chosen which club she wants to join, right? Many of the girls that go to Lulim have hobbies, so there are a lot of clubs. There are plenty I could recommend." She nodded her head proudly.

Chikaru looked at Remon with a bright smile; she also seemed to be suppressing a laugh. "Good idea. The art department Remon-chan is involved in is pretty large, and they have a lot of activities too, so if you have a recommendation, then please share it. But since you're at Lulim—what about joining the club I formed, the Costume Club?"

Remon had been smiling up until then, but when Chikaru impishly made a little peace sign in front of her lips, her brow wrinkled.

"Bring Kizuna-chan into the Costume Club? W-was that what you planned from the beginning, Chikaru-oneesama?"

"Huh? What do you do in Costume Club?" Kizuna asked innocently.

"It's a club where we have fun transforming together. You can become a cat, an angel—actually, you might look cute as a little bear cub or something. Anyway, it's really, really fun!"

"Wow—that's like magic!"

“Yes, that’s right! I will put my spell on you. It’s even more fun than the *Étoile* competition! Hey, come on, let’s do something fun together!”

When Chikaru reached out her hand, Kizuna happily took it and innocently followed her. Chikaru smiled at her kindly, like the Virgin Mary. Remon saw the expression on Chikaru’s face and felt a twinge of worry.

However, she didn’t have the courage to be left behind.

“Wait for me!”

In a mad rush, she noisily chased after them.

“Unforgivable! Unforgivable! Unforgivable! I absolutely hate, hate, hate, hate this!”

A din spread through the hallway at lunchtime. Amane marched quickly down the passage, a demonic look on her face.

“Oh, it’s Amane-sama!”

“So you are going to enter this year’s *Étoile* competition after all, right?”

“Now we will win for sure!”

“I am so thankful to God for sending Prince Amane to us.”

Not a single one of those whispered voices reached Amane’s ears. She stormed down the hall with a suppressed anger that made the girls’ hair stand on end. She headed for...

Baaaam!

With a loud noise, she opened the giant double doors.

“Hey, Shion! Would you explain exactly what is going on here?” Amane rose to her full height and held out a crumpled piece of paper—the *Étoile* competition notice, which looked like it had been torn from the bulletin board.

The object of her glare was Tomori Shion, who tapped the documents in her hand on the desk to align them neatly and softly cleared her throat. Her long chestnut hair fluttered.

The usually calm Amane had stormed in, yelling. Shock and fear spread through the Secretary, Treasurer and the other Student Council staff in the immediate area. They were in the St. Spica Girls' Institute Student Council office.

Shion controlled the commotion in the room with a gesture of her hand. "Oh my, I see you made your arrival early today, Prince Amane—or should I call you the future *Étoile*?" she asked with a chuckle. Despite her calm tone, she looked a little worried.

"The future *Étoile*..." *Cht...* Amane made a sound in the back of her throat and gritted her teeth. Then she clenched her fists as if holding something back and continued in an even lower voice.

"Yes, I did consent to entering the *Étoile* competition. Momomi came and asked; she knew I didn't want to, but she begged me to do it. She asked me to do a favor for the White Star of Spica. Momomi pleaded with me, and she was serious, which isn't usual for her."

Amane lifted her head to the sky and closed her eyes. That unguarded expression made her seem even more determined; sighs of admiration went up from the Student Council staff who were watching her.

"People told me to accept the fact that I should enter. I thought it might be unavoidable this year. Even I like Spica *that* much. When people told me I had to enter so Spica could win, I didn't really think it was true, but—when even the usually goofy Momomi asked me so seriously, I thought, 'Well, okay, I don't have much of a choice. I'll endure it for one year.'"

"Yes, I heard the same thing from Momomi. We humbly accepted Prince Amane's cooperation, and we were just now formulating a plan to make the greatest possible use of it," Shion replied coldly, in response to Amane's intensity. She hoped Amane would lose that dense aura of hers that looked like white particles of light she just couldn't turn away from.

Amane almost shouted in response, "Then WHY! Why, of all people, does my partner have to be that...that—"

Amane's hands shook. She couldn't continue speaking.

Kchak.

A small sound came from the Student Council reference room, in the back of the office.

The door opened. A student appeared, spouting exaggerated lines with exaggerated gestures, as if she were an actor playing Hamlet on stage. “Are you really unhappy, entering with me? What...what sadness. What misfortune! I see that my feelings still do not reach you, Amane-sama.”

The student was a little smaller than Amane, but still tall, with short hair. The darkish shade of her skin, her long limbs and slim body, and her thin lips, high-bridged nose and well-defined features made her look even more androgynous than Amane. Moreover, she had an aura of fearlessness that made her appear masculine.

“Kaname! What are you doing here?” Amane shouted.

“You should know that without my telling you, of course—because *your* feelings, my beloved, are always clear to *me*,” said Hamlet, glaring at Amane. “At least, I wish that were true, but...” She glanced at Shion. “The Student Council President called me here. She said to come during lunch break.”

Shion put her head in her hands. “I asked you *not* to come in, no matter what, did I not? I said for you to initiate our secret plan for the *Étoile* competition instead of Amane, because she hates petty tricks—”

“But while I was waiting, I heard my Amane-sama’s voice, and she sounded really fired up. I thought, ‘Ooh, my precious Prince Amane is having a crisis, I can’t just stand here silently,’” the exaggerated dark Hamlet—Kenjo Kaname from St. Spica Girls’ Institute’s Fourth Year Class *Deux*—said, with theatrical gestures.

“That’s why...” Amane took a deep breath and yelled again. “That’s why I said I didn’t want to enter this thing!! Of all people, why is my partner Kaname?! I refuse! I absolutely refuse!! I withdraw!! If Kaname is going to be my partner, I am absolutely not going to enter the *Étoile* competition!!”

“Ahh, what a rejection. The only one who can thrust me, one of the Five Stars of Spica, into the depths of despair like this is you, my Prince,” Kaname

remarked to Amane, who was breathing heavily.

Contrary to her words, Kaname looked completely impassive as she slowly drew closer to Amane.

When Amane tried to shoo her away with her hands, Kaname drew a single red rose seemingly out of nowhere and offered it to Amane.

“Please give up; this is our fate. It’s all right. It only hurts in the beginning... Please leave everything to me. If it’s for your sake, then I, Kaname, will use every technique I possess to give you the greatest happiness. I make this promise to you: I will give you such pleasure, you will feel as if you were in heaven itself.”

Amane let out a single word. “Idiot!”

The Student Council room went dead silent.

Shion finally opened her mouth. “Ahem. Umm... Uh, well, I can more or less understand why Prince Amane doesn’t want to do it.”

“If you understand, then WHY?!” Amane asked, flabbergasted.

“Princes never get to choose their partners.”

“I thought as long as I entered, my duty would be fulfilled. And the one who came to talk to me was Momomi, so I thought she was going to be my partner.”

“Yes, of course we considered that. Kiyashiki Momomi is one of the Five Stars of Spica, so she is fully qualified. However, considering that our primary responsibility is to capture the *Étoile* title this year without fail, for the sake of our school, we in the Student Council thought this would be the best choice.”

“How is it the best, even for your purposes?! I thought my *cadette* would be feminine and cute, like Momomi. But with Kaname as my partner, it’s like having two boys as a couple!”

“Yes, exactly.” Shion nodded deeply.

“Two boys—” Amane repeated weakly. She was bewildered.

“Having a masculine couple is pretty popular these days, Prince. Were you not aware of this?”

Amane was speechless. Shion smiled broadly at her and continued.

“Prince Amane participating in the *Étoile* competition was joyous news for all the students at Spica. However, I couldn’t possibly imagine that Prince Amane, who hates these kinds of events and has always refused to take part in the *Étoile* competition, would suddenly be so ready and willing to compete, simply because.”

With a look at Amane, who had hung her head in disgust, Shion stood and reached her hand out to Kaname.

“The *Étoile* competition is a serious and surprisingly tough fight, with the honor of all three schools at stake. Even with Prince Amane’s merits, there is still a small possibility that something could happen to hurt our chances, even if your partner were to be Princess Momomi, who is one of the greatest of the Five Stars. So, as insurance against that...”

Shion pressed on Kaname’s shoulder. “We decided to place Kenjo Kaname as your partner. Her unshakable, optimistic self-confidence, her fighting spirit and her strength in competition will be a plus in this battle. She will make the fight a lot easier for you, Prince. She herself is a core fan. And we do not want to see Prince Amane, who is adored by the entire school, fall to a girl. That is the wish of the entire school. We cannot allow it to come to nothing.”

Amane became even more bewildered. *They don’t want me to fall to a girl? But...I’m a girl too, aren’t I?*

Kaname sneered. “Aah, my Prince Amane. This is fate! Come, please take my hand!” She held out her hand. It was wild and angular for a girl’s, yet still beautiful.

Amane felt a lump in the back of her throat. *I guess I don’t have a choice. I have to endure it. To me, becoming the Étoile is nothing but a pain. But just this year, for Spica...*

And here she had planned to go to Miator’s library to do some preliminary

research—which was totally out of character for her—to prepare herself...

“Come now, why do you hesitate? Let us engrave our names in history as the Star of Astraea, a binary star, the greatest *Étoile* of all time!”

Kaname took Amane’s hand. *I...I will become the Étoile, as the Star of Spica. With Kaname...?*

Something inside Amane exploded. “No! Not in a thousand years!” She slapped Kaname’s hand away, and a sharp sound rang out, as if Amane were parrying in a fencing match.

“Amane-sama.” Kaname was dumbfounded by Amane, who hardly ever showed any emotion and absolutely never did anything violent.

“Do you hate the thought of entering with me that much? If you’re sad when you appear with me in the *Étoile* competition, no one will take us seriously as a couple. Yet if you still refuse...” Kaname said without thinking.

Maybe looking at Kaname, who trembled during her lament, calmed Amane down a little bit; her voice was clear and quiet when she said, “No, that’s not it. It’s not that I hate you, Kaname.”

She gave a slightly bitter smile. “Even I didn’t know the reason clearly until now.”

It feels like a dense fog, covering the ocean, has lifted...

Amane faced Shion.

I wonder what happened... Kaname thought. The look on Amane’s face at that moment... Even Kaname, the former captain of the now-defunct bodyguard troop and self-acknowledged long-time Amane-watcher, had never seen that expression before.

Amane continued, her voice soft, “As long as I enter the *Étoile* competition seriously, and we win, then that’s good enough, right, Shion?”

“Y-yes...” Shion was also overwhelmed.

“I will choose my partner. I have a partner in mind whom I have complete confidence in, and who I think can win.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Shion said. “But you did not have a special partner yet, Prince Amane, so we just looked at the qualifications of the girls in the school and picked a suitable partner—and of course it had to be one of the Five Stars...”

“A special partner—I have one.”

“...And of those, Momomi is too feminine, so if you say you don’t want Kaname, either—wait, what did you just say?”

“I said, I have a special partner. Well, actually, it’s not that we’ve made any promises to each other yet or anything. I’m the one who wants the relationship, but still...”

“Whaaaaaat?!” Shion shouted in surprise, and the entire room joined her.

“Amane-sama has a partner, and not only that, it’s a one-sided relationship?!” Kaname looked like she was about to faint.

“W-we didn’t know that. Of course, if you have a partner like that, we will investigate immediately. Now then, what is your partner’s name?” Shion asked sharply as she signaled with her hand for one of the Student Council staff to hand her the student directory. She couldn’t control her curiosity—or the adrenaline rush that came with the sudden change in the situation.

“Hikari,” Amane said bluntly, and then blushed. Even she knew her face was red, so she spun around to hide her embarrassment. “Konohana Hikari. I’m pretty sure she said she was in Third Year Class *Un*.” With that, Amane rushed out of the Student Council room.

Hikari pointed to the bulletin board with a trembling finger. “Yaya-chan... Umm, I think this is it...” Even here in the Third Year hallway, the notice of the *Étoile* competition caused a stir. The gossip flew: “Which couples are major contenders?” and “Which couples are Amane and Kaname’s biggest enemies?”

“I guess there’s nothing we can do. Since Amane-oneesama is in her fifth year, everyone wants her to win the title of *Étoile*,” Yaya said. “No matter how much she doesn’t like to stand out, I had a feeling she was going to be in

the *Étoile* competition this year. It's just that, no matter how you look at it, Amane-sama doesn't have a special partner. Everyone was talking about who might have been her partner... There were a lot of girls dreaming about it. I always thought Momomi-oneesama would be her partner, though. For it to be Kaname-sama—the Student Council made a bold move.” She had an unusually impressed, meek look on her face.

Seeing Yaya's behavior renewed Hikari's impression that Amane was the school's number one star, and it made her a little sad. Looking at the bulletin board made her feel small and pitiful, like a tiny grain of sand washed up on the beach. She hunched her shoulders timidly.

Next to her, Yaya also looked at the bulletin board. Without noticing the tears that had welled up in Hikari's eyes, she gave a satisfied smile and gently hugged Hikari's shoulders.

“Hey, Hikari-chan, did you know? The *cadette* is the younger sister, and the *aînée* is the elder sister. Of course Amane-oneesama is the *aînée*, so... Hey, on the day of the *aînée* competition, let's go and cheer for her! If Amane-oneesama's favorite person, Hikari-chan, comes, I'm sure she'll get fired up and win!”

I don't want to just cheer for her, I want to stand next to Amane as her cadette, if I could.

The thought was vain, but she couldn't help imagining it. And, of course, she couldn't actually say it out loud. It took everything she had for Hikari to reply in a frail voice, “Yeah...”

Yaya finally suspected something was wrong and was trying to take a peek at Hikari's face, when...

“Hikari-oneesama!”

She heard running footsteps and someone yelling in a loud voice from far away. “I recognize that voice... ahh, she's running so fast!”

In the direction Yaya looked, squinting, a small girl was running toward them. She was going much faster than was proper according to Spica's strict rules. Her hair flew every which way and she was out of breath.

“Jeez, Tsubomi, don’t run!” Yaya scolded. “Even if you are on the Student Council staff, if you run like that, you’ll get yelled at by one of the nuns, you know? I thought you’d had enough of doing early morning duties.”

As the girl got closer, Hikari remembered. *Tsubomi-chan!*

Hikari knew Tsubomi from the early-morning lectures she’d had to take in the first two weeks she was at the school. Tsubomi had been a small first-year student, and even though she had just recently entered the school, she was on the Student Council staff, which had surprised Hikari. It seemed that when Tsubomi had heard that an onesama she had been friends with since kindergarten was going to be Student Council President this year, she’d decided, even before entering the school, that she was going to join the Student Council.

The day Hikari had first met Tsubomi, the younger girl had been helping the nun prepare for the lecture. She happened to meet Hikari’s eyes and walked up to her with a smile.

“Excuse me! Umm... I haven’t seen you at Spica before. Are you a transfer student?”

Hikari was surprised that a girl who seemed younger than her would suddenly come up and talk to her, but attracted by the girl’s cheerful, adorable smile, Hikari answered with a smile of her own.

“Yes, I’m Konohana Hikari. I just entered Third Year Class *Un*. Nice to meet you!”

When Hikari said that, the girl seemed so happy she could jump for joy. “Ah! I knew it! You’re the transfer student who moved into the Strawberry Dorms, right? Wow, I heard rumors about you in the Spica dorm. Yaya-onesama said she was going to be sharing a room with a transfer student this semester... Wow, I’m so happy! I got to meet the onesama everyone’s talking about on the very first day!”

Completely ignoring how dumbfounded Hikari was, the girl jumped and clapped her hands. When she suddenly noticed the wide-eyed look on

Hikari's face, she grabbed both of Hikari's hands tightly and started jumping again.

"I never imagined you would be so pretty! I'm Okuwaka Tsubomi, from First Year Class *Deux*! I hope we can be friends!"

She's a really friendly girl, isn't she? thought Hikari.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're here!" Tsubomi panted, interrupting Yaya's scolding. The first thing Yaya asked was why she was in such a panic.

"*Huff huff...* Um, we've got a big problem! Hikari-oneesama!!" Tsubomi said, her long, glistening pink hair bouncing behind her as she recovered from her run. Under the thick headband she always wore to hold back her excessive hair, her large, slightly droopy eyes drooped even further. With an unspeakably pitiful, tearful expression, she looked at Hikari.

"Hikari-oneesama, a-aaaaare you...really..." She swallowed. "Are you really...going to enter the *Étoile* competition with Amane-sama?"

The moment she finished, Tsubomi dropped to her knees.

And commotion erupted in the crowd around them.

"What exactly are you trying to do?"

But even when she was called out and blamed, Shizuma didn't say a single word in reply.

They were just outside the courtyard, in a lonely place that almost no one ever passed through, probably because it was behind the faculty room. It was nicknamed the Garden Grave.

Shizuma turned her back on the two girls who had confronted her. There was a small stone monument which was almost buried in a thicket of wild roses that scattered a sweet, refreshing scent. The monument itself was a square stone slab, half buried in the ground, with a stone cross on top. It only reached knee height. Shizuma gently touched it with her hand and thought about what she should say.

“I don’t have any...particular purpose.” The words that fell from her mouth were even more emotionless than she’d thought they would be.

The words only enraged the girls even more. One, Togi Hitomi, stared straight at Shizuma’s back. She took a step forward and raged, flames of anger shining in her eyes. Her short haircut, which was unusual for Miator students, exposed the nape of her neck, which was slightly red from anger. Her body was supple, like a slender, quick antelope, and it was obvious she was furious.

“It’s not like you to enter the *Étoile* competition with a...a transfer student who just entered Miator, Shizuma-sama! You were bestowed with the *Étoile* title so spectacularly with Mizuho last year, and you were both so happy your names would go down in Miator history, and yet... Were your words of thanks for supporting you all just a lie?! Even we, your admirers who served you, thought it was a perfect year, and after it was over we felt like a weight had been lifted from our shoulders. This is a stain on your reign, Shizuma-sama!”

“A stain? Now, Hitomi-chan, that’s going too far.” A little worried she might be seeing the flame of hatred, Kano Mizuho, who had been standing off to the side, shielded her eyes and chided the other girl in a small voice. “I’m sure Shizuma-sama has some sort of plan.”

Mizuho’s kind voice calmed everyone a little bit. She gave a gentle, tranquil smile as her soft, slightly quirky hair billowed in the spring breeze. However, when Mizuho used her hand to try to keep her hair down, it looked to Hitomi like she was fidgeting to sooth herself, which made Hitomi even angrier.

“Come on, Mizuho, are you really okay with this?! Shizuma-sama is so worthy, of course she’d become the *Étoile* as soon as she even tried, but as her *cadette* you worked so, so hard to get the title, didn’t you?! You said, ‘It’s incredible that I’m Shizuma-oneesama’s partner!’ and did things like study Astraea history all night and practice dancing whenever you had a break, all so you wouldn’t embarrass Shizuma-sama. I know exactly how much effort you put into it. Are you willing to let some silly transfer student ruin that?”

With every word she spoke, more anger welled up inside Hitomi. “No one actually said it, but everyone worked hard together and fought the best they could, didn’t they? No matter how sad it was, they did it for poor Kaori—”

“Hitomi! Don’t mention that!” Mizuho screamed when she heard that name.

Twitch. Hitomi froze for a moment—but quickly regained herself and said bitterly, “No one will say it, so I said it. Because this is too much, Shizuma-sama! It’s just too much!”

Her voice grew progressively weaker, and it sounded like she was about to cry. She thought, *Why is Shizuma so quiet?*

I knew it. So this is why Hitomi called me here. Shizuma’s eyes fell on the stone monument again. The ancient stone relic, called the Garden Grave because the students saw it as being like Christ’s sacred grave, was buried in a profusion of roses. With one hand touching it, Shizuma let her mind drift back—not even trying to offer any resistance to Hitomi’s outburst.

I’m sure she’s resting peacefully right now, buried under the lavender flowers she loved so much. Remembering made Shizuma’s chest ache, but kindness filled her heart—much more than she had even imagined she had in her. Up until now, Shizuma had tried not to think about it.

It might be time for me to face it—yes, it is. This might be a good opportunity.

Shizuma looked over her shoulder and gave a sweet smile.

The two girls always thought of Shizuma in whatever they did. They were Togi Hitomi and Kano Mizuho, both in their sixth year, like Shizuma. Hitomi could be a little difficult at times, but Mizuho was always kind. The two were childhood friends, and they made a good team. Ever since elementary school, they had tried to get involved with Shizuma in one thing or another. Before they’d realized it, the two of them were like Shizuma’s closest relatives.

Shizuma herself thought that having such good childhood friends had probably had an influence on her personality. There were times when other

people treated them like just another pair of Shizuma's admirers. Yet Shizuma was fully aware that if she had a comfortable school life despite having a lot of fans, that was largely due to these two.

But they even called her Shizuma-sama, even though they were in the same year.

They really are serious, aren't they? So soft-hearted, my precious, adorable ones.

Shizuma always looked out for number one and was always fickle, but...

I really do love these two. Just like I loved HER. Now that I think about it, it was these two who brought her to meet me the first time, wasn't it? They said, "We know this adorable girl who really admires you, and on top of that, it looks like she would suit you."

Sakuragi Kaori.

I've changed since I met Nagisa, haven't I... Heh heh heh.

Despite herself, a laugh escaped her lips.

"What are you laughing about, Shizuma-sama?!" Hitomi yelled furiously.

"Now, now, Hitomi. Please don't get so mad," Shizuma said, smiling as if the entire previous discussion hadn't even happened. Hitomi was dumbfounded.

This was the first time she had ever argued with Shizuma like this. Shizuma was strong-willed, so when Hitomi had decided to speak her mind, she had been fully prepared for however much Shizuma might yell at her or hate her—or push her away or tease her. She knew full well she might never be able to talk to Shizuma again after this.

Shizuma continued, "It's not that I don't understand how you feel, Hitomi—my year as *Étoile* ended, and...that was such a tough time. There were so many events, and I couldn't even ask any cute girls out to have some fun. If I hadn't had the support of you and Mizuho, I really might not have been able to handle it. Thank you; I'm truly grateful. Especially to you, Hitomi."

She reached out and gently stroked Hitomi's hair.

Augh! It was so gentle it tickled and Hitomi cringed.

Now that I think about it, we've been friends for a long time, but I think this is the first time I've touched her like that, Shizuma thought.

Hitomi was astonished by the gesture.

"Mizuho was able to be center-stage as my *cadette*, but you were content to work behind the scenes—and I think it may have been much more difficult for you than for her."

When Shizuma drew close, she seemed to give off a fragrance more intense than the wild roses that bloomed around their feet.

"But, you know, now that I've finished my time as *Étoile*, and I'm free...I've been thinking about my last year here at Miator. I've already fulfilled my duty, so I can do what I want; I can enjoy every day however I please, with all of the adorable girls here at Miator."

Shizuma laughed and looked at the sky. Even in this deserted, lonely place, the blue sky stretched above them, and white clouds floated lightly overhead.

"Even I didn't expect this. I never expected to feel like this. Heh heh heh... It's strange, isn't it? Even I don't understand how it turned out this way. I've only just met her, so I don't really know what kind of girl she is, either. I don't know about her home, her family—nothing. She just suddenly showed up in front of me, on the road to Astraea Hall, and I took an interest in her. Ever since then, I've felt myself constantly thinking about her. So you see, that day, when I saw her and Tamao playing around, for some reason I just couldn't stand it. I ended up having as much patience as a little child."

Hitomi became even more bewildered.

"Please understand, okay? I just want to try, that's all. It's not that I want to deny the *Étoile* title I won with you. And it's certainly not that I've... forgotten Kaori, either. But..."

Shizuma smiled, an unusually diffident look on her face, and she spoke in an unsure voice.

“It feels like if I take my eyes off her, she’s going to fly away somewhere. Then I got the idea that if I become the *Étoile* with her, I’ll be able to be with her forever.”

Why would she think that? It’s not like there’s any girl who would leave Shizuma-sama, Hitomi thought, although she couldn’t actually say it.

Shizuma turned her back on the girls, as if she were embarrassed. “This isn’t for Miator or anything like that, I’m just being selfish—so I don’t expect the two of you to help me. I want you to...let me be, just for a little bit. If you ever actually met her, I’m positive you would understand, too,” she said, and she left them there.

“I think that was the first time I’ve ever seen you with such a soft look on your face, Shizuma-sama,” Mizuho muttered in a troubled voice.

Diiing dooong...

Around the same time, in the classroom for St. Miator Girls’ Academy’s Fourth Year Moon Class, after-school cleaning was about to begin.

“Sigh...”

“Sigh...”

The sound of the young ladies’ sighs echoed through the classroom, although there were only two there: Nagisa, holding a mop with a weary look on her face, and Tamao, next to her, pushing a bucket full of water.

“Sigh... This classroom sure seems big with just the two of us in it.”

“I’m sorry, Tamao-chan. It’s my fault we ended up cleaning by ourselves,” Nagisa said innocently, not even realizing Tamao had the easier job.

Tamao grinned. “Oh, that’s all right, don’t worry about it. I’m really happy just being alone together with you, Nagisa-chan.”

“...Right. Thanks.”

Tamao was a bit surprised Nagisa didn’t respond more to what was just one of her usual little jokes. *Oh dear, is she really that shocked?*

The *Étoile* competition notice had been posted in the fourth-year students' hallway at Miator in the middle of fifth-period class.

Tamao heard shouts coming from students who had just finished Classics and gone into the hallway. She didn't pay any particular attention to it, though; she just kept messing around with Nagisa, who was in the next seat.

Then a first-year student charged into the room. "Listen! Listen! Listen! Listen!"

The girl, Iohata Momiji, made a beeline for Tamao's seat. Momiji was famous for being the biggest gossip-monger in Moon Class. Both her naturally wavy dark hair and her famous luxurious eyebrows flew up as she yelled.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" Tamao slowly turned around—but Momiji wasn't even looking at her.

Huh?

Her gaze went right through Tamao and...

"What in the world is going on here?! How could Aoi-san possibly be in the *Étoile* competition? She just transferred here!"

Momiji's frightening stare wasn't directed at Tamao, but rather at Nagisa.

"Huh? The *Étoile* competition?" Tamao said, confused.

"Don't give me that!" Momiji beat her fists on the desk as if she couldn't take it any more.

"Not only that! Not only is her partner that transfer student of all people, but this is Shizuma-sama we're talking about! Exactly what in the world is going on here?"

Ah, I guess the notice for the Étoile competition was posted. So Shizuma-oneesama really did decide to enter the Étoile competition with Nagisa-chan after all. Tamao suddenly realized something. And she did it without saying a thing about it to Nagisa-chan, too... Heh heh heh, that's just like Oneesama.

"The kissing-Shizuma-oneesama-in-the-hallway incident has even been

hushed up. But this is the perfect opportunity. Since we're here, shouldn't we have Aoi-san explain about that?"

Momiji's voice echoed across the classroom; there was the sound of chairs scraping the floor and the crowd pressed in on Nagisa.

"Well, when I'm with Nagisa-chan, it's never boring and I always have fun."

"Oh, not at all..."

With a bucket in her hand, Tamao tried as hard as she possibly could to comfort Nagisa, who was hanging her head. "Look, it was the same that day Shizuma-oneesama and you got the holy water. And besides, I got to see something interesting—"

"Yeah."

Oh dear, she is depressed after all. Tamao tried to lighten things up a little. "Besides, if I had never met you, I'm sure I never would've seen a storm of jealousy that came from an entire class, or been made to do all the cleaning with just one other person."

"Oh...I'm sorry... Well, but even that was because you couldn't stand to see me all flustered trying to do it on my own, so you came and helped me, Tamao-chan."

It wasn't so much that I couldn't stand watching; it was more because I just couldn't let the chance be alone together with Nagisa-chan slip by.

Tamao stuck her tongue out in her mind, but pushed the bucket with a gentle, angelic smile. "Come on, let's work hard and get this over with fast. I'm sure those girls from class are regretting what they said right about now! If we clean up quick together, I just know they'll start to respect you more."

"Th-thanks, Tamao-chan. You really don't have to be so considerate of me..."

"Oh, no, it's all right. Don't worry about it. I'm sure it was God who put us in the same class together."

If we don't hurry up, I'm sure a bunch of Shizuma fans will get in the way and try to suck up to Nagisa-chan by pretending to help her.

The fact that Nagisa didn't see her hidden intentions was Tamao's joy.

"Yeah, I'm really glad I could be in the same class as you, Tamao-chan. So, the *Étoile* competition, huh? I still don't know much about it at all, but...if I really do have to enter it, I wish it could have been with you, Tamao-chan. Then I'm sure I wouldn't feel so anxious," Nagisa said in a tearful voice.

Tamao thought, *Oh, how adorable she is*, and had trouble fighting back the urge to hug her. She looked off to the side to hide her embarrassment. "I really do wonder what Shizuma-oneesama's intentions are. I can't believe she forced innocent you into the *Étoile* competition—an intense battle of pride between all the schools. It's a festering pile of trickery—and on top of that, she did it without even asking you!"

In contrast with her statement, Tamao was thinking, *If Nagisa-chan enters the Étoile competition, more people are going to find out how cute she is and try to go after her!*

Twitch twitch twitch.

Nagisa huddled herself up as much as she possibly could. *Is the Étoile competition really that incredible?* She thought back on how everyone had acted when they'd stopped by earlier—and the blood-curdling looks on their faces.

They all asked, "Why are YOU entering the Étoile competition, and with Shizuma-sama, too!" And they all looked so serious. Uuugh...I'm scared.

"You know, Tamao-chan, I told everyone this, and it was the truth. I didn't do anything, you know? I never applied, of course. I never even knew there was something called the *Étoile* competition until just a little while ago. And besides, I was never even asked if I wanted to enter with Shizuma-oneesama."

Even as she was speaking, Nagisa realized the truth of the words. *That's right—I never DID say anything about entering the Étoile competition.*

"That's right! Hey, Tamao-chan, I wonder if this is some sort of mistake?"

That's it! Hey, hey, hey, hey, that's it! That has to be it! I never did anything, and no matter how incredible a person Shizuma-oneesama is, it's ridiculous to enter it so suddenly, when I didn't even know about it!"

Tamao looked at Nagisa with pity, and Nagisa sensed something from Tamao that made her stop talking. Tears welled in her eyes.

Tamao hugged Nagisa's shoulders to comfort her. "I think it's a pity, too. It's like...you're being made into a sacrifice, you know? But...since this is Shizuma-oneesama we're talking about, there's nothing we can do. There aren't many people in Miator—or in all of Astraea for that matter—who can go against her.

"No, don't cry—it's all right. If you're that unsure of yourself, you won't get past the first round. To tell you the truth... The first *cadette* competition is the *Examen sur l'Astraea*, a quiz on your knowledge about Astraea Hill. It's a preliminary test to see if the *cadette* has enough knowledge about all three schools to represent them, and to eliminate the weakest contenders. So it's okay. Since you've just transferred in, there's no way you can win. Which makes me wonder what in the world Shizuma-oneesama was thinking."

Nagisa reacted by jumping into Tamao's arms. "R-really?! Is that true, Tamao-chan?"

Oh my, her mood certainly changes quickly! Tamao thought.

Nagisa gazed at Tamao, tears of relief glistening in her troubled eyes.

She's just like a cute, loyal pet dog that's just been forgiven by its master. Tamao was so mesmerized she dropped her guard—and involuntarily said what she really thought.

"Yes, because there are seventeen couples in the first competition. Everyone who entered is popular, and has been enrolled in this school since kindergarten—but I still think at least half of them will be eliminated in the first contest. I think, since you're a transfer student, it will most likely be a hundred percent impossible for you to make it through, so probably... I don't think Shizuma-oneesama seriously thinks she can win the *Étoile* competition. I think she's just using it as a way to be with you, or doing it for fun. She's the kind of person who believes life is all about doing flashy

things. She probably has feelings for you, and she wants to show everyone. It's like she wants to say, 'Look at my adorable little Nagisa-chan!'"

"I see, so she's not serious." Nagisa was starting to think of it as just a short ordeal she would have to deal with. After what Tamao said about Shizuma's expectations, Nagisa was overjoyed.

Aahh, I'm so relieved. Thank goodness! If Miator lost because of me, or I caused problems for Shizuma-oneesama, I don't know what I would do! If I'm an embarrassment to myself, I can't help it, but I don't want to cause other people problems.

Nagisa didn't quite realize other people were actually causing problems for her. But even as she thought about how relieved she was, she started to feel just a little bit lonely.

I see. So she's not...serious. I guess that makes sense. There's no way I could become a representative for the school. I'm so relieved! It did have me worried. Being blamed by everyone—being forced to report every single word Shizuma-oneesama said—if it's something so incredible everyone reacts the way they have been, just thinking about it makes me scared. My heart races, I break out in a cold sweat.

Just a little bit, in the deepest reaches of my heart, I'm actually kind of excited—now I can see Shizuma-oneesama again. A sixth-year student and a fourth-year student. The Queen of the School getting together with me, the transfer student who seems like she only got into this school because of some sort of mistake—that's impossible. Or at least it should've been. Now that I think about it, it makes me kind of sad. My nose is tingly.

Tamao sensed Nagisa was downcast and tried to look at her face.

Nagisa turned away. *I don't want anyone to see my face like this.*

When Tamao realized what Nagisa was thinking, she put her hand on Nagisa's chin to force her to face her.

Clatter clatter clatter clatter... There was a loud noise, then the door to the classroom opened.

"This is horrible! This is horrible! Nagisa-oneesama! If you don't hurry up,

Shizuma-oneesama's fans are going to—oh! Tamao-oneesama is here, too!"

The one who had burst in was a small first-year student with bobbed hair, Tsukidate Chiyo.

"What's wrong? Why are you in such a panic?" Tamao asked calmly and maturely as she whipped her hands away from Nagisa.

"Oh! M-my apologies! I was in a hurry, and I just..."

"It's not like you to just barge into a room without asking if you can come in, Chiyo-chan. Like I always say, when you're visiting another classroom, you have to stand outside, give your name and ask if you can come in first."

It wasn't like Tamao to lecture. Even she didn't know whether she was giving one now because of the flustered state Nagisa was in or because she was embarrassed Chiyo had seen her with her hand gently on Nagisa's face.

"Y-yes, my apologies, but..." Chiyo was bright red, and she was constantly looking over her shoulder.

Is someone coming? Tamao was worried for a moment, but she continued on. "I also told you that if nobody answered, you shouldn't go inside. If you let manners like that slide just because this is a girls' school, it's all downhill from there..."

"R-right!" As Chiyo cowered from Tamao's unusual scolding, she kept stealing glances toward the door.

"What in the world happened? What are you so jittery for?" Just as the words left Tamao's mouth— *Tromp tromp*. It sounded like a huge crowd of students was making their way down the hall.

"Ah! Ah! What'll I do?" Chiyo sounded like she was about to cry.

"What happened?" Nagisa and Tamao asked in surprise.

Clatter clatter clatter clatter—pssshak!

The classroom door opened again with a flourish. A crowd of girls wearing "Shizuma-Oneesama Is My Life" headbands surged into the room.

"This is Aoi Nagisa's classroom, right?"

“What do you think you’re doing, entering the *Étoile* competition with our Shizuma-oneesama!”

“We are so going to tear into you for this one!!”

“Aaugh, Nagisa-oneesama, run!” The words turned into a little scream in Chiyo’s mouth.

Chapter 5

Beautiful Sisters Fighting a Phantom

Tell the Truth Before the Sea God

Intermission: Nagisa-chan's Miator Diary

I've just gotten called out again, during lunch break today.

Fourth Year, Moon Class, Aoi Nagisa-sama.

There are a few things I would like to ask you regarding the Étoile competition.

Today during lunch break, come to the roof of John Hall.

We will discuss the particulars then.

President of the Association for Conveying the Love of Lady Shizuma and Kaori

Fifth Year, Flower Class, Yamashina Sen

Eek... This is a letter of challenge!

Waah. I'm scared!

Tamao-chan, who's sitting next to me, is pointing and chuckling, though. 'Goodness, Nagisa-chan, you got called out again? The same thing happened yesterday too, didn't it? Wow, you're really popular, aren't you! You're so popular with the upperclass onesama—I'm jealous!'

Uugh—she doesn't have to tease me like that. It's only been a month since I came to Miator, and I feel like I'm between heaven and hell.

By hell, of course, I mean being called out by scary onesama.

It seems weird to say this, but ever since the Étoile competition announcement, it feels like I've suddenly become the center of attention of the entire school. Just walking down the hallway, I can hear people

whispering about me.

‘Hey, look. It’s that girl Aoi Nagisa!’

‘She doesn’t look like anything special at all.’

They whisper stuff like that as if they don’t even care if I hear it. I feel so small.

—They’re right, though. I’m really not anything special. I want to scream at them that it’s all some sort of mistake, but I can’t do that, either. But I can understand how everyone feels.

When I transferred in, and I happened to meet Shizuma-oneesama in Maiden Park...I didn’t know she was such a special person. I just thought Miator had some really pretty girls in it.

That’s right. Now that I think about it, there’s no way there’d be many people like her. I still remember the beautiful hand of the goddess, reaching out to me. I felt like if I took her hand, I could float all the way to heaven. I had no idea she was the number one goddess in Miator. And when other girls saw her paying attention to me, a really normal girl who had just transferred to Miator...

It wasn’t funny.

I guess the only thing I can do right now is do my best to endure being called out—just like I did yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that—every day this week.

Tamao-chan says I’m being soft. But I feel like I can’t calm down, even when I’m alone.

Shizuma-oneesama is falling in love with me, and it’s kind of like, it just... doesn’t seem real. It feels like I’m having some sort of self-serving dream.

And when I get called out by scary oneesama, I suddenly realize it isn’t a dream.

Tamao-chan offers to go with me every time, and I’m grateful for that, but I turn her down. There’s absolutely nothing I can do except bear with it and try with my whole heart to explain it to them—and hope they understand.

Doesn't that sound like I'm hopeless?

Ahh, the door is opening. It's another upperclassman—

“Excuse me. I am Ebisawa Koharu from Fifth Year Snow Class. Where is Aoi Nagisa-san, the girl who is entering the *Étoile* competition with Shizuma-oneesama?”

Waah, I'm scared...

Somebody help me—!!

Patter patter patter patter patter patter...

The distinct sound of flat shoes against the floor echoed through the pitch-black hallways of the Strawberry Dorms.

10:45 P.M. The blurry light of a flashlight moved dimly past the room.

“Room 218...no problems,” Sister Catherine muttered with a smile.

Yawn...

This isn't good. If I'm not careful, I'm going to fall asleep. I guess I'll end my night watch here and go back to my room to get some rest.

She had been reading *The Legend of St. Francis*, a thick book, every night of late, so she was a little sleep-deprived.

It was a quiet spring night. When she glanced through the window, she saw a big, round, yellow moon shining in the sky.

“Try your best not to make a sound, all right?”

“Yeah!”

Tiptoe, tiptoe, tiptoe... Nagisa repeated it in her head, like a spell. She nervously left her own room, her body shivering in the pleasantly cool air, and followed Tamao.

Wearing a gown over her pajamas, holding her shoes in her hands, breathing as softly as she could, Nagisa looked down the silent hall and

sighed in relief.

Thank goodness—somehow we've managed to get this far without being caught. Only a little farther to the courtyard, she thought, then suddenly started to worry again.

Doesn't it kind of seem—a little too quiet? It's really tonight?

"Hey, Tamao-chan, is there really a midnight party tonight?"

"Shh!"

"Ah, sorry, sorry." Nagisa lowered her voice even more. "But it's so quiet... It's like there's no one here—or, actually, like everyone's sleeping, but—"

"You're going to be shocked when we get to the courtyard. Oh, hey, try listening very closely." Tamao put a finger to her mouth to silence Nagisa.

Nagisa listened with a serious look on her face. A faint din reached her ears from across the silence. "Oh!"

"Did you hear it?"

"Yeah! But the Strawberry Dorms have someone patrolling at night, right? This is the first time I've ever been invited to a midnight pajama party, but won't we get yelled at if we get caught?"

"You don't have to worry about that, Nagisa-chan. We've got everything arranged."

"Oh, okay. I just transferred a month ago, so that's not something for me to worry about, huh?"

"Oh, come on, don't be like that. Your naïveté is the best thing about you. Besides, you might not have noticed, but we let the nun on patrol pass by us just a few minutes ago, you know? Sister Catherine's on duty tonight. She's a heavy sleeper and she's nice. We'll be fine from here on out!"

"Oh, I see! Then I'll relax. I'm such a klutz, I've been afraid I'm going to mess up and make a loud noise."

As soon as the words fell from her mouth, Nagisa's shoes fell out of her hand.

Ktnk bthd clop!

“Sssh!”

Nagisa cringed.

“You are seriously clumsy, Nagisa-chan. Come on, let’s get out of here fast. I’m sure the party’s in high gear by now. I don’t think your coming will cause many ripples. But just in case, you’d better not get too far from me, okay? Don’t go by Shizuma-oneesama! Tonight is a really important celebration, the eve of the *Étoile* competition. It’s the most important social gathering for the Strawberry Dorms. If you cause some sort of trouble tonight...the oneesama are going to do a lot more than just call you out, you know?” Tamao said with a wink.

She picked up the shoes Nagisa had dropped and looked around to see whether the coast was still clear. Then she took Nagisa’s hand as if she were a lost kindergartner, squeezed it tight and walked on.

The sound of elegant music—a three-beat song, maybe a waltz—came softly from somewhere. Someone had snuck a CD player into the party.

The courtyard of the Strawberry Dorms spread out in front of Nagisa. In the center were several large tables, decorated with white crosses and piled high with cakes and sweets. Lit by countless candles, there were dishes of various colors and even warm teapots. It was like an outdoor party. Around the tables were groups of girls talking and playing games, wearing different colored pajamas and negligées, enjoying the party.

“Wow, I never knew you did stuff like this in the courtyard at night.”

In an effort to hide, Nagisa sat on the stairs in the shadow of a fountain. She was about to mutter something about high-class girls’ schools like this being in a completely different league when someone spoke to her.

“What’s wrong? Why are you sitting in a corner all by yourself?”

“Oh, Tamao-chan said she would go get something to drink, so I’m waiting for her. She said that since all that excitement about me entering the *Étoile*

competition hasn't died down yet, it would be best if I didn't go near the tables in the center... Ha ha ha ha."

Nagisa had thought it was someone from her class, but when she turned around, her jaw dropped.

"Umm, umm, umm..."

"My, was there really that much excitement? It must have been horrible for you, Nagisa-chan. And now you can't even enjoy the party, you poor thing."

In her mind, Nagisa yelled, "I-I-I-I wasn't the one who started it all!"

Standing in front of her was Shizuma. She wore a velvet gown of deep crimson over a glossy off-white negligée. She gave Nagisa a flowery smile as if to ask "Would you mind if I sit here?"—and sat next to her.

She kindly offered Nagisa a glass filled with a clear liquid that sparkled with golden light. Tiny bubbles burbled through it.

"How pretty."

Shizuma laughed as if she could tell exactly what Nagisa was thinking and took a sip.

"It's all right, it's not alcohol."

Now that Nagisa looked again, she saw that Shizuma also held a glass. *She went through all the trouble of bringing it to me...* Nagisa blushed a little when she realized what that meant.

I wonder if she was looking for me. When the thought crossed Nagisa's mind, she got a strange buzzing feeling in her chest. *I wonder if it's okay to think Shizuma-oneesama is a little—just a little—interested in me after all.*

Nagisa blushed, and to hide her embarrassment, she gulped down some of the golden drink. The bubbles tickled her mouth as they burst.

Along with the buzz of the crowd, which was getting even more excited as the night wore on, Nagisa still heard the faint sound of the waltz.

I wonder what time it is.

Shizuma, though she had intentionally come looking for Nagisa, for some reason kept quiet. Eventually a comfortable silence settled between them.

Her beautiful profile as she gazed quietly at the party, the distant buzz of the crowd...

Nagisa just sort of...wanted to hear it from Shizuma. The words flew out of her mouth, straightforwardly, without any embarrassment.

"Shizuma-sama, why did you decide to enter the *Étoile* competition with me?"

Shizuma responded in a soft voice, "So, you really don't want to do it after all, Nagisa-chan? You really don't want to be in the *Étoile* competition with me?"

She hadn't answered Nagisa's question, but asked a question of her own. For the first time, Nagisa honestly, seriously faced what was in her heart.

"Well...at first... At first I thought it was ridiculous. I never would've even dreamed of entering on my own. And that's still what I think. For a transfer student like me to enter is absurd. Ever since the announcement, I've been called out by so many of the older students—and they all told me the same thing. If I entered, I would only drag you down. I have absolutely no idea what I should do. I don't even look right sitting next to you." Even as she spoke, Nagisa wilted at the sound of her own words.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that," Shizuma said. "I just did it on the spur of the moment. I didn't think there would be such a big reaction."

"Oh, you just did it on the spur of the moment? That makes sense, sure. That's what I told everyone. This is just Shizuma-oneesama's whim, she just did it off the top of her head, there's no way she's actually serious about making me her partner."

As she spoke, Nagisa's voice got smaller and smaller.

Up until then, Shizuma's tone of voice had been unusually kind, but now she raised her voice as if she were angry. "That's right, I just did it off the top of my head—but I am serious!"

Shizuma-oneesama...

Shizuma's face was so serious it was almost scary. Without even looking at Nagisa, she began to talk in a faltering, completely un-Shizuma-like voice. But she was so forthright about everything, Nagisa felt like she could feel Shizuma's very being as she made her unexpected confession.

"To tell you the truth, ever since then...people have been saying things to me, too. 'What in the world are you thinking?!' they say. There are some who think it's selfish of me to try and take the title when I've already won it once. And there are some who think it's absolutely impossible for me to win with a transfer student, just like you said, Nagisa. I've even been asked if I intend to defile the sacred crown of the *Étoile*."

Nagisa couldn't believe what she was hearing—there were actually people who would say things like that to a noble Queen of the School?

"Of course, I don't care what they think. No matter what other people say, I will do what I want. Even if it's something that began as a whim, now it's what I want most in the world. It doesn't matter how it started. I will get what I want. I will do what I want. There are times when even I think I'm impulsive. But that impulse always drives me. That is the way I live my life. There's not a single thing I regret. But..."

She suddenly stopped moving. "I don't want to...cause you problems, Nagisa-chan. And I don't..." She turned toward Nagisa. "I don't want you to hate me, either." She had a pained look on her face. "So please tell me the truth. If you really don't want to do it, I will drop out of the *Étoile* competition."

Nagisa looked at the expression on Shizuma's face—and was absolutely stunned.

"Oh, no! I would never hate you, Shizuma-oneesama!" She shook her head. "I don't think there's anyone in this entire world who could feel like that!! I... If there's anything I can do to help you, and I mean anything, I'll do it! If you want to enter the *Étoile* competition or whatever, then I'll enter it! Umm, actually, I'm really happy! It's really intimidating to me, but if I can be by your side, Shizuma-oneesama, it makes me happy. Because I love you,

Shizuma-oneesama,” she said earnestly.

Nagisa gasped. *That sounded like I was confessing my feelings to her!* She hastily put a hand over her mouth.

“Thank you. You’re such a sweet girl,” Shizuma said, lowering her eyes. “Are you...disappointed now?” She plopped her hand on top of Nagisa’s head and smiled with a touch of self-derision.

“N-not at all! Shizuma-oneesama, you’re... Shizuma-oneesama, you’re absolutely gorgeous and stunning, like a goddess. Not only that, you care so much about everyone, even someone like me. You’re really such a nice person.”

Nagisa wanted to cheer up the downhearted Shizuma, but she was frustrated that those were the only words she could say.

“Thank you. But I knew you would say something like that, Nagisa-chan. I don’t know exactly why. I’m completely different when I’m with you. I didn’t realize it before, but I feel like this is the real me,” Shizuma said, drawing closer to Nagisa. “Hey, would you mind, just a little?”

Nagisa had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, but Shizuma didn’t even wait for her to answer. She just suddenly rested her head on Nagisa’s knee.

“Shi-Shizuma-oneesama—”

“Sshh, be quiet...”



Shizuma's face, looking unusually vulnerable, her eyes closed in rapture, was directly below Nagisa's face.

Nagisa could feel the weight of Shizuma's head, and her warmth, on her thighs. She couldn't move. Through the thin cloth of her pajamas, she felt Shizuma's warm breath on the hollow of her stomach. She prayed Shizuma wouldn't be able to hear her heart pounding.

A sweaty, damp feeling pervaded the depths of Nagisa's body.

Some time passed with the two of them in silence.

"Shizuma-oneesama, are you asleep?" Nagisa murmured timidly.

"Just a little more—let me stay like this just a little more, please. This is the greatest..." Shizuma's eyelids were still lowered. "This is the greatest feeling I've ever had."

"Here's to Spica's victory in the *Étoile* competition! Cheers!" Tomori Shion gave the toast.

Loud shouts rang out from the ring of Spica students surrounding her.

"Cheers!"

"Here's hoping Amane-sama is crowned *Étoile*! Cheers!"

In the center of the ring stood Amane, looking incredibly uncomfortable. She downed her drink in one gulp and whispered into Shion's ear, "Can I... leave now?"

"I understand how you feel, Prince Amane, but this is the long-awaited eve of the *Étoile* competition... So please stay, just a little longer," Shion replied with a smile, her face not showing a hint of the screaming going on inside her.

Amane went silent, a bitter look on her face. Somehow she managed to stay.

Shion bit her lip in frustration. *For heaven's sake! She has so much star potential. Her attitude is so disappointing. If she wasn't so shy, people would*

get even more fired up about her.

But Amane usually didn't even come at all, because she said she wasn't interested in this kind of midnight party—this kind of open-yet-secret fun and games. So the fact that she had even showed up to the party probably made everyone admit Shion's methods had some merit.

Now if Shion could just get Amane to stay until the circle of admirers broke up to enjoy the rest of the party, she would have fulfilled her mission.

Just as the thought crossed Shion's mind...

"But still, are you really so sure we're going to win the *Étoile* competition?" Kenjo Kaname suddenly asked loudly. She grinned maliciously and gulped down her red drink.

Momomi, next to her, tried to interrupt. "Honestly, Kaname!"

Kaname didn't even slow down. "Now that Prince Amane is finally entering the competition, everyone seems to be getting caught up in the excitement, but I'm...worried...whether we can really win like this. Hanazono Shizuma-sama from Miator has decided to enter for an unprecedented second term. They say Miator Student Council President Rokujo Miyuki, sharp girl that she is, is putting together some serious strategies. But we at Spica are relying on Amane-sama, whose *cadette* is just a regular third-year student."

"But that was..." Shion rushed forward. "That was because Prince Amane insisted on her. With Amane-sama as the *aînée*, it doesn't matter who the *cadette* is, Spica's victory is certain. All of you acknowledged that already, didn't you?"

"That's right! What in the world is wrong with you? You're acting strange, Kaname!" Momomi went to take Kaname's glass. Kaname snatched it back, and blood-red liquid splashed all over the tile of the courtyard.

Kaname's rant continued. "Shut up! Do you really think I'll actually allow something like...like this? I've been waiting for this since elementary school, yet...my Prince chose that...that obscure third-year transfer student over ME!"

A single student moved out of the ring.

“I-I didn’t mean it!” The small girl’s eyes were full of tears and her slender shoulders shook horribly. She didn’t say another word before—*tmp tmp tmp tmp*—she ran off.

“Wait, Hikari!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Amane chased after her. She didn’t even glance at the people around her; it was like Hikari was the only thing she saw.

“Kaname-sama, you made her cry!” the long haired girl next to her, Nanto Yaya, said teasingly.

“I didn’t realize she was there!” Kaname spit out, trying to hide the little regret she had.

“Hikari-chan is small and adorable, so she must not have stood out enough for you to see her,” Yaya said in a sing-song voice. Yaya and Kaname appeared to have known each other for a long time.

After Hikari and Amane left, Kaname lost all of her energy. However, in spite of the conversation between Yaya and Kaname, the can of worms had been opened. The rest of the Spica students reacted predictably, voicing their opinions on Amane’s actions.

“What is going on with Amane-sama? The way she just acted, it looked like she was actually serious about that girl!”

“Amane-sama is adored by all the students at Spica. We can’t let that transfer student monopolize her!”

Just as someone said they should go after Amane and find out what the situation was, Shion clapped her hands and frantically made an announcement.

“This ends the toast for our celebration! Everyone please enjoy the party! However...” The Student Council President tried to live up to her nickname of Snow Queen by putting on the coldest smile she possibly could.

“Regarding Prince Amane’s actions, from now until the end of the *Étoile* competition, the Spica Student Council forbids any interference by the Spica student body!”

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Everyone fell silent.

“Our dominance of the *Étoile* competition has been the dearest wish of all Spica students for many years. Now that Prince Amane has finally made the decision to enter, please be aware that if anyone interferes in Amane’s personal affairs, or displeases her, the Spica Student Council will use all the power at its disposal to pursue punitive measures.”

Somewhere in the distance, there was the sound of a waltz coming to its climax.

Amane eventually caught up to Hikari in the dark back yard of the Spica dorm. “I’m sorry...I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Hikari!” she said, hugging the girl, who was in a daze. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Hikari. It’s just, if I absolutely have to enter the *Étoile* competition...you’re the only one I can think of as my partner.”

Hikari silently trembled in Amane’s arms.



“I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would be like this—that this would happen to you. It’s all my fault, Hikari.” Pain ripped through Amane’s body and she held Hikari even tighter. Her cheek, which had been exposed to the wind, brushed Hikari coldly.

The shock brought Hikari back to her senses. Her heart began to beat fast.

I’m being held tight by Amane-sama. Up until now, I thought I shouldn’t be Amane-sama’s partner...

I think it was a mistake for me to come to this school. I wish I hadn’t...met Amane-sama, either... If I hadn’t, I never would’ve felt this hurt.

Thoughts like those had swirled through Hikari’s mind as she was running.

But she had been caught by Amane, who had held her without even being told if she could or not. And she was apologizing to Hikari over and over again, almost pleading with her in a fit of passion.

Hikari couldn’t think any more. She finally spoke in a fragile voice. “...It’s all right... I’m all right now.”

Hikari squirmed and lifted her head, and right in front of her was Amane’s face.

“Hikari—” Amane looked like she was about to cry.

Hikari wanted to cry, too. But something stopped her.

I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t make Amane-sama cry because of me.

Hikari forced herself to smile. “I was weak. I’m sorry. I-I might not be able to be any help, but if you say so, Amane-sama...” She smiled, but her eyes were full of tears. “I’ll try as hard as I possibly can! I want to help you, Amane-sama, even if it’s just a little bit.”

“Hikari!” Amane didn’t know what else to say. She just held Hikari tight. Even after something like this, she just couldn’t bear to let Hikari go.

She simply thought, *I must protect her.*

“Chikaru-oneesama, these sweets are so good, aren’t they?!”

At the site of the midnight party, Minamoto Chikaru, the St. Lulim Student Council President, who loved dressing up, and the cheerful-as-always second-year student Hyuga Kizuna tasted the sweets Chikaru recommended.

“Oh, really? That’s great. These *galettes* are made at the convent in Nagano. The Astraea Hill order has a facility there. They’re special pastries, not usually sold. Only people from Astraea can eat them. I guess you could say they have a homemade taste because our own nuns made them,” Chikaru responded, smiling as she prepared a fresh pot of tea.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. They’re so good. I wish they were sold regularly so I could eat them whenever I want.”

“These *galettes* are almost always delivered for events and celebrations at Lulim, so you’ll be able to eat them again soon. For the time being... Oh yeah, when the *Étoile* competition’s *L’Ouverture brillante* is over, there’s the first *Petite couronne* presentation ceremony, so I wonder if they will be there...?”

“*Petite galette*?!”

“Heh heh heh heh... *Petite couronne*. It means ‘little crown’ in French. The *Étoile* competition is designed to have three competitions, after which only one couple is left. But the couple that places first in each of the other two competitions receive small crowns. The couple that places first in the last competition becomes the *Étoile*, so the *Étoile* must get at least one crown, but in the first and second competitions, several of the top couples can pass on to the next stage even if they didn’t place first and win the crown for that competition, so the couple that eventually becomes the *Étoile* might not necessarily have gotten a crown in one of the first two competitions.

“If a couple places first in all three competitions, they get to place three crowns on the large scepter the *Étoile* carries, and they are highly honored—I’m really looking forward to seeing if Amane-chan can accomplish it this year,” Chikaru added, glancing at the group of Spica students in the distance.

“Oh Chikaru-oneesama, you’re talking about the Prince again! I know! You love the Prince too, don’t you? Oh, I just had a great idea! Why don’t

Chikaru-oneesama and Prince Amane—”

With the *galette* still stuffed in her mouth, Kizuna hopped up. She was about to say “enter the *Étoile* competition together...”

Cough cough cough cough!

She started choking.

“Oh no! Here, drink some tea.” Chikaru picked up Kizuna’s cup and held it out to her.

Kizuna drank the tea, her face bright red.

As she looked fondly at Kizuna, Chikaru thought, *What suits me isn’t a prince, it’s a princess... No, it might be an adorable girl like you.*

The next day, and the morning of the first *cadette* contest of the first of the *Étoile* competitions, *L’Ouverture brillante*, had finally come.

The hallways of St. Spica Girls’ Institute were abuzz with conversation.

“Hey, did you hear?”

“Yeah, I did!”

“Is it true today’s *cadette* competition isn’t *L’Examen sur l’Astraea*?”

“It looks like it! They said for just this year, they’re going to go with the Mouth of Truth.”

“Why?! They should first have to test the *cadettes* to make sure they have the minimal amount of basic knowledge about Astraea—they do that every year, don’t they?”

“Well...see, this year there are transfer students...”

“Ooh, them! Oh yeah, Miator’s Shizuma-sama’s and our Amane-sama’s partners—both new students who just transferred in this spring. They would definitely be at a disadvantage in *L’Examen sur l’Astraea*... I can’t say this out loud, but that’s—”

“—Yeah, I think so, too.”

“What, I haven’t even said anything yet!”

“But I could tell what you were going to say! ‘Favoritism,’ right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re right. I want Amane-sama to get the *Étoile* title, and it’s for Spica, so I don’t like mentioning it, but—”

“—It seems like favoritism, doesn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

“I wonder if the other contestants are mad. Most of the members of the executive committee are from Spica this year, right? Spica could be criticized for going too far, but—”

“—I agree.”

Diiing dooong diiing dooong diiing dooong...

The special bell announcing the beginning of the *cadette* competition rang at 1:00 in the afternoon. Today, all afternoon classes were cancelled at all three schools on Astraea Hill.

Although it was part of the glorious *Étoile* competition, *L'Ouverture brillante* was nothing more than the first of three competitions. Not only that, the *cadette* competition was just the warm-up.

In any other year, some students not actually involved in the competition would simply go home, but of course there would still be a lot of students who would stay to watch. But this year, with the dream standoff between Amane and Shizuma becoming reality, all of the schools were filled with excitement.

And it wasn’t going to be the typical, plain *Examen sur l'Astraea*, the paper test on knowledge of Astraea Hill, either. This year, it was going to be the more dramatic Mouth of Truth.

The Mouth of Truth.

The nickname came from the famous Mouth of Truth³ in Rome. The

Astraea version, part of the relief carved into the wall close to the entrance of Maiden Park, bore the images of angels and saints instead of the face of the fearsome sea god Neptune.

No one knew when and why it had been made; it was simply part of history, along with Astraea Hill.

A single large shining star—a pentagram—was carved deeply into the center of it. Young ladies who passed by jokingly called it the Mouth of Truth. This had continued for a long time, and at some point it had started to be used in an oath ritual between friends and lovers.

There were many different legends about it. One said that if two people placed their hands in the star-shaped hole together and made their oath, and one of them lied, that one would have her hand cut off, or be hit by a meteor and die. Another said that if two people made an oath there, they would be blessed by a holy archangel.

Of course, most of the young ladies used their judgment when they heard those legends. But there were some who really believed them. There were even some who insisted it could be used like a lie detector. And some went so far as to say it made everyone face the truth in her heart, and that anyone who faltered, even a little, in front of the Mouth of Truth was not trustworthy.

And yet those same young ladies grew into fine women.

Today, students gradually gathered in front of the gate to Maiden Park.

A white ribbon had been placed across the Mouth of Truth, as if to seal it off.

Tmp tmp tmp tmp tmp...

Nagisa ran down the empty hallways of Miator, blushing so badly it seemed as if steam would come out of the top of her head any moment.

I have to hurry, I have to hurry, I have to hurry—I'm going to be late for the cadette competition! But before the cadette competition, I absolutely must...

I absolutely must go to the library!

As she hurtled down the hall, Nagisa remembered the spell Tamao had placed on her with a smile as she left their room this morning.

“It’s all right, I’m sure the first competition will be easy for you. Of course, I don’t really want to accept your coupling with Shizuma-oneesama, but...I’m a Miator student too. I want you to do your best for Miator.”

With those words, Tamao tossed a handful of rose petals and rose water over Nagisa just before she made her usual mad dash from the room.

“It’s just a little spell we use here in the Miator dorm. There, now everything will be fine. The scent of the roses will always calm you. Good luck, Nagisa-chan. When you get nervous, you get giddy, so I’m just a little worried...”

Tamao remembered when Shizuma had kissed Nagisa, and she chuckled.

Nagisa laughed nervously, smiling in an effort to show she would try her best. The truth was that she felt like she was under unspeakable pressure, and she had left the room with her shoulders slumped.

It occurred to Nagisa that if Tamao had been her usual self, she would’ve said it was a given Nagisa would lose, and that the ruckus would thankfully end today. Even though Tamao was normally quite cynical, saying things like Miator was a school for high-class girls who didn’t know a thing about the real world, she had another side as well, one that wasn’t so depressing.

“Right, even if you are a transfer student, you can still enter to represent Miator. If it gets ugly, well, that’s the way it goes.”

Sigh.

Nagisa’s sigh faded away, as if absorbed by the quiet hallway of the Strawberry Dorms.

Then, at the very end of morning classes, which had begun so gloomily, the letter had come from someone behind Tamao.

“This is from someone behind me,” Tamao said as she handed it to Nagisa. Miator green paper folded in the shape of a small star—a pentagram.

Nagisa looked behind her, but no one gave any kind of signal identifying them as the letter-writer. She didn’t sense any kind of ill intent from the folded paper, which had “To Nagisa-chan” written on it.

Nagisa—who had gotten called out every day for days—opened the letter without any trepidation, read it, and...was shocked.

Aoi Nagisa-sama,

Before the first cadette contest begins, there is something I would really like to show you.

Without you seeing this beforehand, it will be impossible for Miator to win. Even though you are a new transfer student, I have been deeply moved by your heroic efforts. The way you went forward undaunted, heeding none of the great deal of wise advice given to you by upperclassmen! Ahh, the only word for it is heartbreaking.

We would like to assist you from the shadows, so that you may survive today’s cadette competition and make your debut in Astraea stardom.

Please, you must, must meet me before the cadette competition.

I will be waiting at the library. At the noble green Miator star. There you will learn the truth behind this year’s Étoile competition and Shizuma-sama.

I pray Shizuma-oneesama and the honor of Miator’s victory will be protected forever.

From one of your fans.

Wise advice? Heartbreaking? There are a lot of parts I don’t really understand, but... Ahh! This means the person’s cheering for me, right?

Of course the people in her class were nice to her, but ever since the confusion with Shizuma had started, Nagisa had been the frequent recipient of both open and concealed jealousy and spite from the students who attended Miator. This was the first time someone she didn’t even know had reached out to her and shown her warmth.

Yeah! There are people who support me, like this, too! The note was really polite and a little mysterious, so there were parts that were hard to really understand, but still... Anyway, I'm really happy! I'll do my best!

When lunch was over, she barely evaded Tamao, who urged her to hurry to the site of the contest.

"Sorry, I forgot something, so I'm going to go back for it, okay?"

Nagisa left the classroom alone.

Murmur murmur...

People gathered and the air filled with enthusiasm.

Bcht!

The microphone was switched on and Shion's voice echoed around the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming. It is now time to begin the *cadette* contest of this year's first *Étoile* competition, *L'Ouverture brillante*. All candidates please gather here."

The noise of the crowd that had gathered in front of the gate to Maiden Park grew louder for a moment. Within the throng were Shizuma and Chiyo, talking about Nagisa.

"That Nagisa-chan, I haven't seen her yet. I wonder what in the world happened?" Shizuma said.

"She's late, isn't she... I'm worried. Nagisa-oneesama might even be lost somewhere," Chiyo said, standing beside Shizuma. Since the day Nagisa had been in charge of the holy water, Chiyo and Nagisa had become friends.

"Yeah, I should have gone to meet her after all. Nagisa is so clumsy, you know? She's the type who would make a huge mistake right at the most important time!" declared Shizuma.

Chiyo thought it was so funny to see Shizuma in this state, she couldn't help laughing.

“Ahh, I wonder if entering the *Étoile* competition with her was a mistake after all?”

Chiyo responded to Shizuma’s little joke with a nod. “But it is because of Nagisa-oneesama that you entered the *Étoile* competition for the second time, right? To tell you the truth, I saw it in a photograph—Shizuma-oneesama wearing the *Étoile* crown last year. It was so sublime, it almost brought me to tears—it was truly splendid. Even though they say a moment like that comes only once in a lifetime, to think you are going to try again... You must truly love Nagisa-oneesama.”

When she realized what she had said, she gasped. “Oh, umm, I-I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry, Shizuma-oneesama...” Chiyo looked like she was about to cry.

Shizuma stood quietly, then finally said, “No, it’s all right, don’t worry about it. That was the truth of who I was then.”

Even though that’s what she said, Shizuma’s face still stiffened subtly.

Togi Hitomi, one of Shizuma’s followers, hid in the shadows, watching the *Étoile* competition that was about to begin.

Huff huff huff...

I finally made it.

Standing in front of the large library doors, Nagisa caught her breath. She’d been to this giant building—this Secret Garden—only once before, when Shizuma-oneesama had brought her. She was a little scared to go in by herself, because she was afraid she’d see something like she did last time. But there wasn’t time to think about that.

“All right, here I go!” She psyched herself up and placed her hands on one of the doors.

Creeeeak... There was a heavy, dull sound as the door opened.

The now-familiar black and white checkerboard floor lay before her.

Chk chk chk...

Nagisa walked forward timidly, her footsteps echoing through the building. Once her eyes adjusted to the dim light inside, she saw several people in the hall. She didn't feel the air of excitement she had before, though. The place had the atmosphere of...a quiet, deserted library.

"I guess there aren't many people here today," Nagisa muttered.

"Because the *cadette* competition is today; everyone went to watch it," someone answered, right beside her.

Waugh!

Startled, she looked in the direction of the voice and found she stood next to the checkout counter. Sitting behind it was library committee member and previous *Étoile cadette* Kano Mizuho. With a grin, she explained her presence in the library to this underclassman she had never seen before.

"Hello. If you are here for something specific, please ask. Since today is my day to be on duty for the library committee, here I am, unable to watch the *cadette* competition. I want to help everyone as much as I possibly can."

Oh yeah, I have to hurry. There's someone here who's cheering me on! I have to be useful to Miator, even if it is just a little. Then I'm sure everyone will understand me, I just know it!

This upperclassman member of the library committee, who complained she couldn't see the *Étoile* competition but looked like she didn't care anyway, seemed nice, Nagisa thought.

"Um, I'm waiting for someone! I got a letter saying that someone had something she really wanted to show me before the *cadette* competition. Umm, I ended up being a little late, but do you know if anyone came here looking for Aoi Nagisa from Fourth Year Moon Class?"

"Aoi Nagisa from Fourth Year Moon Class?! Then you're—" Mizuho stopped mid-sentence, her mouth wide. "But why are you here?! By now the *cadette* competition has begun," she said frantically.

"It's all right! No, I mean, that's not the point—there's something I absolutely have to see before the *cadette* competition! Because the way things are now, I have absolutely no confidence I can win, so...umm, so once

I see what I came to see, I'll run as fast as I can, so it'll be all right. I'm sure I'll make it in ti—”

Something leaped into Nagisa's vision. A green pentagram. The Miator star, the exact green color of the necktie of Miator's uniform. The words of the letter came back to Nagisa.

“I will be waiting at the library. At the noble green Miator star.”

This star was on the cover of a thick book, sitting on the counter where Mizuho sat, with special large print and shiny foil leaf. It was placed between the white star of Spica and the red star of Lulim.

The book was the Astraea directory.

“Excuse me, is that—”

“Yes, they're the Astraea Directories. They contain the history of each of the three schools—”

Carried away by an urgent impulse, Nagisa grabbed the book, completely ignoring the rest of Mizuho's attempt to explain. Between the pages of the book was a green slip.

The words “To Nagisa” were written on it in small cursive letters.

What's this?

When she opened up to the page where the slip was, she saw a large picture that took up the entire page. The picture was of Shizuma-oneesama, wearing the *Étoile* crown and smiling so elegantly, so beautifully, it was almost scary. Next to her was a pretty girl wearing a small tiara.

“Ooh, is this—” Nagisa's thought faded away; she was speechless.

Mizuho peeked at the page Nagisa had opened to and smiled wryly. “Oh, that. That's right. Shizuma-sama asked me to be her partner, so I didn't really have a choice—you know. It was an awe-inspiring thing, though.”

Mizuho noticed Nagisa's expression and hurriedly continued, “But it's not what you're thinking! You don't have to worry about it. I... I've known Shizuma-sama for a long time, since elementary school...so we get along, but I'm not the kind of person who can be her partner. Come on, relax. She is out

of my reach. There just wasn't an appropriate partner for her back then, either."

Mizuho let her eyes water. "I happened to be by her side by chance...so it's nothing you need to worry about. Besides, this is something everyone who was at Miator last year knows," she said, and smiled weakly.

Deep down, Mizuho sympathized with the underclassman. No, you might even say she was...cheering for her. And for the one she loved—the goddess she adored.

The sunlight pouring through the skylight reflected beautifully off Mizuho's soft chestnut hair. Nagisa was drawn in by her kind aura, and she knew, instinctively, that this girl really did love Shizuma-oneesama.

She's much more important and beautiful than I am. If Shizuma-oneesama is out of reach for HER, then someone like ME and Shizuma-oneesama must be like a turtle and the moon, a mole and a goddess, a stone and the galaxy!

As she was thinking, she caught sight of some very small writing—the text that went with the picture.

"Okay, next couple, come forward, please."

At the entrance to Maiden Park, Spica's Student Council President, Tomori Shion, presided over the *cadette* competition, which was progressing smoothly.

The two candidates called forward by Shion stood in front of the star-shaped hole in the center of the angel relief.

Shion placed transparent white veils on their heads. Then the two knelt, joined hands and put their hands in the hole.

"Go further in..."

Following Shion's instructions, the two of them put their hands in so deep they couldn't be seen from the outside. Then the questioning began.

"I ask the *aînée* candidate, Yonogi Maya of St. Miator Girls' Academy, Fifth Year, Moon Class. Do you swear to protect and help the *cadette* candidate

next to you, no matter what?”

It seemed that, as a general rule, the correct answer to the question was “yes.”

“Yes, I swear,” the *aînée* candidate answered.

“Then please give a sign of that oath,” Shion continued.

The Miator *aînée* candidate took her hand out of the hole, stood up, summoned the *cadette* candidate close to her and whispered something in her ear. The *cadette* candidate’s face went bright red.

Then she lifted the *cadette* candidate in her arms.

Murmurs of approval ran through the crowd.

“So cool...”

“Protect me, too...”

Tumultuous applause rose and many flowers were tossed into the wicker basket that had been placed in front of the spectators. Vases of flowers were placed around the site, and when the spectators thought a couple was good, they threw some of them.

“Next, I ask the *cadette* candidate, Takeda Estelle of St. Spica Girls’ Institute, Fifth Year, Class *Un*. Do you swear to protect and help the *aînée* candidate next to you...?”

At the most, there would be five questions. If the basket was not filled with flowers by the end, that couple had to drop out. Almost all of the “star” candidates would remain, but generally, about a third of the entries would be eliminated at this point in the competition.

The ranking of the couples who remained would be determined in the *aînée* contest the next day. The couple who placed first would receive the first small crown, the first *Petite Couronne*.

Usually, the Mouth of Truth was used as the second competition. It was essentially a popularity poll.

Tamao appeared among the ring of spectators surrounding the *cadette* competition without a single worry on her mind.

“Oh! I found Chiyo-chan!”

“Ah! Tamao-oneesama!”

For an instant, Chiyo looked so relieved she might cry. However, when she realized Tamao was alone, she looked even worse.

“Nagisa-oneesama is... Nagisa-oneesama is missing!” *Drip*. Chiyo couldn’t hold it back; a tear fell.

Tamao was shocked. “Whaaat? Oh no! But just a few minutes ago, she said she forgot something, and we separated—she said it was all right, she would be coming soon. Ahh, and here I was so happy because she was more excited than I thought she’d be, like she had some secret plan or something, so I thought she’d finally gotten fired up about the competition...”

No matter how scary things get, she’s not the kind of girl who would run away.

Tamao remembered Nagisa’s smile, which had never faltered as she had bravely endured being called out by so many upperclassmen over the past few days.

“I wonder if something’s happened?” Tamao’s face suddenly became serious, which made Chiyo even more uneasy.

“What should we do? It’s going to be Nagisa-oneesama’s and Shizuma-oneesama’s turn soon. Once Shizuma-oneesama gets called, it’s all over,” Chiyo said, trembling.

“What number couple are they on now?”

“They’re almost halfway, number seven. Nagisa-oneesama and Shizuma-oneesama are number ten, so...”

“We don’t have a choice; the only thing we can do is try and get them pushed back in the order. I’ll go and try to work it out. Chiyo-chan, after I do that, let’s go look for Nagisa-chan together. All right?”

“S-sure!”

Looking at Tamao's strong profile, Chiyo was able to relax a little, and her heart gently warmed. *Tamao-oneesama is so reliable.*

Nagisa still stood in the library, looking at the page of the Astraea Directory. The text that accompanied the picture of last year's *Étoile* coronation was written in small letters.

The Étoile aînée Hanazono Shizuma-san, from St. Miator Girls' Academy, Fifth Year, Snow Class, and her cadette, Kano Mizuho-san, also from the Fifth Year Snow Class. At the coronation, Hanazono Shizuma-san looked to the sky and confessed, "This Étoile title is dedicated to our irreplaceable friendship and to my adorable little sister, the late Sakuragi Kaori, who truly should have been standing with me as my cadette. I give all of my love to you..." The speech brought every Miator student to tears and the day went down in Étoile history.

Nagisa felt like she had been shot through the heart.

The words of the letter came back to her:

"There you will learn the truth behind this year's *Étoile* competition, and Shizuma-sama. I pray Shizuma-oneesama and the honor of Miator's victory will be protected forever."

What in the world is going on...?!

At that moment, the library's clock rang.

Gong gong gong gong...

The hands of the clock pointed to 2:00.

"I ask the *aînée* candidate, Otori Amane of St. Spica Girls' Institute, Fifth Year, Class *Trois*. Do you swear to protect and help the *cadette* candidate next to you, no matter what?"

Instead of the noise that had come from the crowd during the previous couples' questioning, the spectators watched this couple with bated breath. Despite the dramatic shift, Shion had asked the first question calmly.

In front of the entrance to Maiden Park, kneeling at the middle of the Mouth of Truth, Amane said, “Yes, I swear,” and looked at Hikari. Hikari knelt beside her, trembling. She didn’t even try to look at Amane, just faced forward with her eyes closed.

Amane felt sorry for her. *She must be nervous.* In the next moment, she thought, *Ahh, how adorable she looks!* Other feelings like that bubbled inside her, and Amane laughed to herself.

Shion said, “Then please give a sign of that oath.”

Amane wasn’t the kind of person to think up some kind of sophisticated performance at a time like this, so, just like the previous couples, she helped Hikari to her feet and said, “I swear to protect her, like this.”

She embraced Hikari proudly, as though she were a princess.

The sight of Amane standing with her face to the sky—simply embracing Hikari to her chest, gently, without any kind of trick, her tall height and gallant face magnificent—was refreshing.

Amane’s indescribably bright, relaxed smile, unusual for her to show in a public setting, overflowed with her sense of euphoria. The happy, loving couple’s golden aura—which was apparent even to the people who watched—shone brightly in the spring sunlight.

Shouts that weren’t quite cheers and weren’t quite angry roars rose from the spectators at a terrific volume several times higher than for any couple before.

“Aaugh!”

“Stop, I can’t take any more!”

“But it’s too incredible!”

“Prince Amane!”

“Hold me, too!”

“I don’t want to see that!”

The Amane fans didn’t want to see any more, but they tossed many

flowers, which flew around and into the basket. At first, Shion smiled wryly at the response. “That was...to be expected, I suppose... Heh heh.”

She asked the spectators for silence. “Everyone, I understand how you feel, but please quiet down. Now for the next question.”

One group of Amane fans, who had been suppressing their desire to toss their flowers of praise in order to watch Amane’s proud moment just a little bit longer, leaned forward in anticipation.

Shion, feeling as if she were tossing food to carp in a pond, smiled broadly and asked the next question.

“Now then, I ask the *aînée* candidate, Otori Amane. Do you swear to love the *cadette* candidate next to you always, and offer her your unchanging love, even if either one of you should take a husband, for as long as you both shall live?”

Otherworldly screams rose from the crowd.

“Aaugh!”

Nanto Yaya stood in a corner, grinding her teeth. *Honestly! I can’t believe that Shion-oneesama, pulling a trick like that. It’s no fair changing the questions during Amane-oneesama’s turn.*

“If Shion-oneesama keeps doing stuff like that, Hikari-chan’s going to fall even more in love with Amane-oneesama! And if innocent little Hikari-chan does fall in love with that awkward Amane-oneesama, they’re just going to get hurt! No one understands that!” she muttered.

From behind her came the sound of laughter.

“I feel exactly the same way. The star of the campus and a transfer student—yeah, right. This isn’t a novel. It’s obvious they’re going to get hurt. But it seems this particular ‘illness’ is more severe in your couple, doesn’t it?”

When Yaya turned around, Tamao was standing there grinning, with an expression on her face that showed her pity for her fellow sufferer.

“Oh, I didn’t mean...” Tamao started.

“It’s just for now. Once the initial fever goes down...even Hikari-chan understands. If she stays with Amane-oneesama, she’s going to be hurt, more likely than not. She’s going to be hurt and suffer. I want to be there for her when that happens,” Yaya said.

“You have a lot of patience, unlike me. I’m jealous,” Tamao said, and pointed to the front of the crowd. “If you let your guard down this time...you might not be able to recover, you know?”

High-pitched, lovely voices and an even bigger commotion raced across the site. When Yaya frantically spun around, there was Hikari, slumped in Amane’s arms. She had been about to receive a kiss on the forehead from Amane, to seal their oath, when she had fainted.

“Aaugh! Stop, I can’t take any more!!”

With shouts that were closer to screams, the students scattered countless flowers into the sky.

“Ah! Nagisa-oneesama! Thank goodness! I’ve been looking for you. Where have you—” Chiyo couldn’t finish the sentence. She was struck dumb by the strange, unusual feeling she got from Nagisa.

Chiyo had been watching the intense scene between Amane and Hikari from between her fingers, her heart pounding. She had been surprised when Nagisa had suddenly appeared, and had run frantically to meet her.

Nagisa apologized, embarrassed, with a stiff expression on her face. She didn’t even look at Chiyo. “Did I make it on time?”

“Just barely! Tamao-oneesama negotiated with them and got them to change you to the last couple! Shizuma-oneesama is getting ready, down front. She said she knew you would come...”

Nagisa thanked Chiyo in a small voice and headed toward the administrators. She looked incredibly lonely as she walked away.

“Excuse me, Oneesama,” Chiyo called from behind.

“What?”

When Nagisa looked over her shoulder, Chiyo didn't know what to say.

"Good...luck."

Nagisa gave a weak smile. "Thanks."

In front of the relief, a sharp voice called her. "Over here, Nagisa."
Someone pulled on her arm.

Nagisa was surprised, but Shizuma didn't care, or even give Nagisa a chance to speak. She just quickly fixed Nagisa's hair, put the veil on her head and gave her a complete once-over, a stern expression on her face.

"That should do it," Shizuma said, and relaxed. "I was worried, you know? What happened, did your stomach get upset? Did you suddenly have to go to the toilet?" She poked Nagisa's cheek.

Before Nagisa could say anything...

"Come on, it's our turn. It's all right, you don't have to do anything, Nagisa. If you just follow me, it'll be fine," Shizuma said, misunderstanding Nagisa's stiff expression.

They stepped forward, toward the Mouth of Truth.

"Now then, I ask the *aînée* candidate, Hanazono Shizuma of St. Miator Girls' Academy, Sixth Year, Snow Class. Do you swear to protect and help the *cadette* candidate next to you, no matter what?"

The first question was the same as the other couples'. However, Shizuma, who loved theatrics, didn't take Nagisa into her arms like the other *aînées*. She surprised Nagisa, kneeling to make her oath.

Nagisa accepted it with a dumbfounded, aimless gaze. Both loud cheers and boos rose from the crowd, and of course countless flowers flew through the air, but it wasn't enough to fill the basket in front of them.

And then, the second question. Shion cleared her throat. Just like she had with Amane, she said, "Now then, I ask the *aînée* candidate, Hanazono Shizuma."

Here her voice wavered, and her breath stopped. She was hesitant after all. It was cruel, what she was doing. She had felt like a demon when she

chose the question. Now she asked herself whether she should really do this to Shizuma.

However, Shion's hesitation had made the spectators even more expectant. Passions flared as they waited for the next bit of excitement. Shion's goal was to drop a bomb that would blast across the entire site in one swoop, and also, as a natural consequence, lead Spica to victory, but—When she looked at the sight of Nagisa, her expression rigid—probably out of nervousness—and Shizuma kneeling beside her with a charming smile, Shion unconsciously lifted her face to the sky and closed her eyes.

Shizuma-sama, please forgive me for being so sinful.

“Do you wish to be bound to the *cadette* candidate next to you as your one and only partner, both in this life and the next?”

“Waaaaaah!”

That cruel question, which asked Shizuma to declare that she wanted to become one and only lovers with Nagisa, who would be together even after they were reborn, caused a thunderous storm of shouts and applause from those gathered at the site.

Somewhere along the way, Nagisa became confused about what was going on. The only thing she heard was something about being one and only partners, even in the next world.

Shizuma's hand, which held hers deep inside the hole of the Mouth of Truth, shook badly. The picture of Shizuma as the *Étoile* jumped into Nagisa's mind. Her incredible beauty, her strong will and her dignified smile, like a queen's—and the text: “To my adorable little sister, the late Sakuragi Kaori... I give all of my love to you...”

Ahh, now I understand. No matter how thickheaded I am, even I can understand this. Shizuma-oneesama had someone once who was much, much better matched to her than me. Someone much more appropriate. She had a real, steady partner...

But I didn't want to know about it. Everybody probably thought I was weird, being so sure of myself...and some people are angry at me, too. That's it. That

has to be it. Someone like me with Shizuma-oneesama? Now that I think about it, the idea was strange from the start.

Nagisa's mind went completely blank and she froze.

Shizuma stood. Still holding Nagisa's hand tight, she pulled her to her feet. Shizuma faced the crowd, almost as if she were challenging them, raised Nagisa's hand high and shouted, almost in a roar.

"I do—I swear it. I take Aoi Nagisa as my one and only partner for the rest of eternity."

Even before Shizuma finished speaking, the loudest swirl of screams, roars and shouts that day rose from the crowd.



“Oh, please don’t say any more!” the young ladies screamed.

The sky was dyed crimson with flowers, thrown about like a defeated fighter’s towel.

“Nagisa, you were so great today! I’ll forget all about the toilet thing. Let’s do our best again tomorrow, in the *aînée* competition, okay?”

Once the *cadette* competition had ended, Shizuma said those parting words, joined some girls who seemed to be her followers and quickly disappeared from Nagisa’s sight.

Without telling Nagisa a single thing about the truth.

Left behind, Nagisa lost all her steam. She almost thought the whole thing might have been just her imagination. She watched, dumbfounded, as the spectators left, and then spotted Chiyo standing alone. She ran over to her.

“Chiyo-chan!”

“Nagisa-oneesama! That was so...so splendid!” Tears welled up in Chiyo’s eyes.

Now that I think about it, Nagisa thought, remembering, Chiyo is a member of the library committee.

Chiyo had been sitting at the counter on the day Nagisa had been in the library with Shizuma.

“Um, Chiyo-chan. Could I...ask you something?”

As if she had anticipated this, Chiyo silently nodded. Then Chiyo told her. She didn’t know everything that had happened, because she hadn’t been at the school yet back then, but...

What she did know was this sad story.

Chiyo and her friends had been upperclassmen in the elementary school—the age when little girls experience the joy of moving to the middle school they’ve always longed to attend, the feeling of wanting to grow up and the desire to get even just a little bit taller. These little girls felt they would be

getting a glimpse into the world of adults—the world of the onesama they admired.

It seemed like no matter how many times Chiyo and her friends had talked about it, it had always produced sighs.

Shizuma had still been a fourth-year student then, and the center of the Astraea universe. Everyone was expecting Shizuma to become the *Étoile* the following year, and she had a partner accepted by everyone.

Sakuragi Kaori of Third Year Snow Class.

They had said she was just as incredible a beauty as Shizuma, but that she was delicate, giving the impression she was made of glass so fragile she would break if you touched her.

She had worshipped Shizuma completely. Many girls had even said she wouldn't be able to live without Shizuma. She totally relied on the onesama, but from an outsider's point of view, her position had been an enviable one.

"It's just that..." Chiyo said timidly to Nagisa, "Kaori-sama's devotion to Shizuma-onesama was obvious to everyone. As for Shizuma-onesama... Well, ever since she was very young she's been popular, so she wasn't like that with Kaori at first. But there was an incident... Kaori became sick and collapsed. It was tragic."

It seemed that within a month after she'd become friends with Shizuma, Kaori had discovered she was stricken with an incurable illness. Filled with despair, Kaori had tried to withdraw from the relationship.

"I don't know if it's true or not, but that's the rumor," Chiyo said apologetically. "It made Shizuma flaming mad, and from that point on, Shizuma was constantly by Kaori's side. If she saw flowers, she would give them to Kaori. She would always be looking for delicious food or pretty things for Kaori. A sick room was set up inside the Strawberry Dorms as a special exception. Because Kaori wanted to stay at school until the end. As much as possible, anyway. And she wanted to be with Shizuma."

She had started showing signs of her illness in the fall. And in the middle

of winter, with the cold wind blowing, she had left the school.

In the spring, news of her death had arrived...

“That’s what I heard,” Chiyo said with a sorrowful look on her face. “Everyone said that when Shizuma-oneesama entered the *Étoile* competition that spring, she had truly become an adult. That is all I know. But I’m sure Tamao-oneesama knows more about it than me.” Chiyo smiled demurely.

Lured by her infectious smile, Nagisa was able to smile herself, just a little bit. It was the kind of story that made her cold to the very core of her body, but...

“Yeah. I have a feeling Tamao-chan would be too worried about hurting me to tell me the truth. Thank you so much...Chiyo-chan. I forced you into a position you didn’t want to be in. I’m sorry.”

Seeing Nagisa’s weak smile, Chiyo had doubts about whether this had been the right thing to do.

That night, in the large Roman-style bath of the Strawberry Dorms...

“Oh no, what’s wrong, Nagisa-chan? What are you moping for? You don’t look very happy...”

Sploosh sploosh sploosh—Tamao sent some of the bath water flying. “At times like this...” She jumped into the large tub with a big *splooooosh*.

“Aaugh!”

“Stop it!”

“Jeez, Tamao!”

The shouts came from all over and echoed around the mist-filled room lined with brightly colored terra cotta tiles.

“Come on, it’s okay to swim like this, right? You can’t do it in your bath at home, now can you? I guess this is one of the good things about the Strawberry Dorms.”

But no matter how happy and playful Tamao was, Nagisa just couldn't get into the same spirit. She fumbled with the soaking wet sponge in her hand, but didn't wash or rinse herself off, just sat there absentminded and sighed.

"Yeah, thanks. But I don't think I will today; I'm kind of tired," Nagisa said with an exhausted look. Nagisa put on her best smile, but it came out stiff. *After all, Tamao-chan is going through all the trouble to cheer me up!*

"A lot happened today that I wasn't used to, so I'm sure I'm just tired from being so nervous. Ah ha ha ha!"

"Oh Nagisa, what am I going to do with you..." Tamao's heart twinged. Even she couldn't do anything. "Yeah, I understand. Then today, as a special service, I'll wash your entire body!"

She stood up to her full height.

"Whaaat? You don't have to do that!"

"Don't be shy. It's all right."

"Aaugh! That tickles!! Stop it, Tamao-chan! Ah! Not there! Aaaaaaaahh!"
Across the mist, bubbles flew into the air.

In another part of the Strawberry Dorms, another girl stood worrying.

"I wonder if it's okay this way?"

Standing on the balcony alone, gazing at the moon, which had passed through the full moon of the pre-competition party and was now entering its last quarter, was Otori Amane, age seventeen, who lived in the Spica section of the Strawberry Dorms.

Spring love... Amane had been hit hard by this powerful sickness. The look on Hikari's face when Amane had kissed her on the forehead, and when she had fainted from the strain... Amane still couldn't get it out of her head.

Whether she liked it or not, the conflicting emotions of terror at making her faint and rapture at the sight of Hikari's face when her eyes were closed had controlled Amane's body—and now she writhed in agony.

“Aah! This is almost like—” *It’s like I’m the same as Yaya.*

She remembered her kouhai, who was well-known for being a “genuine lesbian,” who hated men and was only interested in girls.

I wonder if I’m strange, Amane pondered.

Chapter 6

A Rainbow Shines in the Valley of Tears That Have Dried

The weather on Astraea Hill the next day was gorgeously sunny, almost like an early summer preview. It was the morning of the second half of the premiere contest, the morning of the *aînée* competition.

“Woow...look at the crowd!”

Spica Student Council Secretary Okuwaka Tsubomi, a first-year student with long, shiny, peach-colored hair, was making preliminary arrangements. When she entered the horse-riding grounds, she was startled at how many people were there.

Even though the competition was being held early in the morning, before classes started, there were a lot of girls there who wanted to see the race.

Yes, the first *aînée* competition was a horse race.

What else could be expected from a famous school for high-class girls? The *aînée* candidates must know how to ride a horse or else they were completely unfit to represent the schools.

In a corner of the horse-riding grounds, which lay to the west of St. Spica Girls' Institute, the *aînée* candidates were lined up, each riding her favorite horse.

The horses, all of them large thoroughbreds with shiny coats, all pampered and obviously highly valuable, neighed loudly.

One white horse stood out from the many chestnut-colored ones. In the saddle of this horse, named Starbright, was Otori Amane. Wearing white riding pants, a white jacket and a royal blue tie, Amane looked exactly like a Prince.

Next to her was a jet-black horse with a white star on its forehead—*L'éclair noir*. Riding him was Hanazono Shizuma, wearing a riding jacket that matched her steed's coat. Her silvery hair was tied up, which was unusual, but it looked attractive against the black of the horse.

Sighs flowed from the spectators as they watched the Prince and the Queen. Suddenly a light fanfare sounded, signaling that everything was ready. Then the early-morning events developed quickly.

The horses, warming up in one corner, had been waiting for the signal, and leapt into the riding area as soon as they were given the okay.

They were ready to go.

The noble young ladies—all of them elite and capable enough to be more than a match for any ordinary male—turned their horses toward the “Tower of Captivity” set up in the center of the riding area.

Just like the scaffold used during Festivals, the Tower was a simple tall framework with four pillars and a platform with a light roof. The platform was high, higher even than the roof of the nearby stable. In one part of the base, there was a slope even a horse could climb, but that was only one meter high, and the only way to get any higher was to use a set of narrow stairs.

The *cadette* candidates climbed to the platform, each dressed in a unique costume. There was a Snow White wearing a red ribbon, a Cinderella with glass slippers and even a long-haired Rapunzel. They were the “captured” princesses.

The costumes had been chosen and designed not only for style but for ease of movement. None of them were grandiose, but each had been made with the help of the couple's supporters, and they were all the kind of costume that would tickle a girl's fancy.

Every young girl who saw them sighed and thought, *I wish I could wear a costume like that and be saved by the onesama I adore so much.*

The way the competition would go was that the captured *cadettes* would stand on the platform, held at a height that could only be reached on

horseback. There they would wait, expectant, for their gallant princes—their *aînées*—to come and rescue them.

In yesterday's *cadette* competition, twelve of the seventeen couples who had entered had been able to get their baskets filled with flowers by the end of the five questions. In order to reduce the original number by half, only the top nine after this *aînée* competition would be allowed to go to the next competition.

The second fanfare blared: the starting signal. The gallant horses dashed from the riding grounds all at once and galloped toward Maiden Park, where a special course had been set up.

The *aînée* candidates would leave the riding grounds, ride down the narrow horse trail that wound its way through lush Maiden Park, and return to the riding grounds and the Tower.

This course, used only on special occasions, was quite long—one full lap around the vast Maiden Park—so the start was more elegant than frantic.

The spectators stood in the small area set aside for them, which encircled the riding area, and enjoyed ogling the elegant *aînée* candidates on their horses to their hearts' content. Among the spectators was a student with an opera glass in one hand, looking as if she belonged at Ascot.

The Tower of Captivity was rather small. The platform where the young ladies stood had a guardrail with a single white ribbon wound around it, but it was flimsy and swayed in the wind. Not the kind of thing they could grab onto in an emergency.

The twelve *cadette* candidates pushed and shoved each other in the center of the platform and waited for their *aînées* to rescue them. While they waited, a restless atmosphere hung over the crowded *cadettes*.

"There's not enough room!"

"It must be because there are two last-minute entries here who don't belong."

They didn't exactly make a big scene, but it did make some wonder where the crowded princesses got their ideas from.

“The transfer students stood out; that helped them.”

“They used force to get the format of the first competition changed.”

“They have no idea how many years we’ve been trying to be chosen as *cadettes*.”

“They’re seriously annoying!”

Ahh...they’re talking about me, aren’t they? It sounds like there are some people who are really angry after all... Still not able to think quite clearly, still shocked by yesterday’s events, Nagisa listened to the girls from a corner of the platform, not knowing what to do.

Tamao and Chiyo had asked their classmates to help them make Nagisa’s costume. It was an angel outfit with lots of real white feathers. Tamao had said that everyone’s a sucker for a pretty costume, and had put everything she had into making Nagisa’s.

Shizuma’s black riding clothes had been designed to look demonlike. Tamao’s idea was that the couple would bring the theme of Forbidden Love to life.

Although Nagisa was grateful for Tamao’s help, she was somewhat sad as she absent-mindedly gazed over the area.

It’s not like I’m going to win anyway. And it’s not like Shizuma-oneesama was serious when she invited me. She just did it for fun. I don’t care about anything any more. I just want this année competition to be over with soon, Nagisa thought.

The other *cadette* candidates kept up their chatter.

“Her partner is Amane-sama, so it’s a given that no matter what happens, she’ll make it to the final competition.”

“Kenjo Kaname-sama, one of the Five Great Stars, was really supposed to be Amane-sama’s partner.”

“A lot of people really wanted to see those two paired together, you know?”

“And yet look who ended up her partner!”

“Yeah!”

When she heard the talking, Nagisa looked to her side—and noticed a Spica student who looked like she wanted to run away. Hikari, wearing an ephemeral mermaid-princess costume, stared at her feet, trembling.

Oh, I see... It's her, huh? I feel sorry for her. No one expected Shizuma-oneesama to enter when I was made her partner—so I'm sure this poor girl is getting treated a lot more harshly than me.

Nagisa had heard a little about the situation in Spica from Tamao. Forgetting her own situation, she completely sympathized with Hikari. Despite the tension of the race, Nagisa's thoughts turned to the poor girl beside her.

That's right... Even I've heard about Spica's Prince. That's what all that fuss was about yesterday... Yeah, if she's not careful, people might be even more jealous of her than me. Poor thing... If I get kicked or stepped on, I'm strong, I can handle it, but this girl's different. She seems pretty weak-spirited. She looks like she would burst into tears if she got shoved or fell. I'm the kind of person who can smile even when stuff like that happens!

Thinking about it got her charged up and she scratched her nose.

Ah ha! I got a little embarrassed, just saying it to myself!

With those thoughts in mind, Nagisa turned to Hikari. She was about to ask whether she was all right and tell her not to worry so much when...

“Waaah!” Cheers rose from the spectator area.

The gates to the riding grounds opened wide.

The horse at the head of the pack, kicking up an impressive amount of dust, was...

White. Starbright, ridden by Amane! Close behind her was a glistening jet-black horse, *L'éclair noir*, with silver-haired Shizuma on his back.

Just as most people had expected, it had come down to a one-on-one battle between Amane, Spica's ace of the horse-riding club, and Shizuma, who came from a powerful ranch-owning family.

Loud cries rose from the spectators.

“Yay! Amane-sama, keep going!!”

“Shizuma-sama! Please pass that white horse!”

Now comes the real battle, was what they were all thinking.

The *cadettes* in the Tower of Captivity crowded along the edge of the platform, each leaning over to try and see what place her beloved *aînée* was in.

“Augh!”

A small scream reached Nagisa’s ears.

Nagisa looked for the source of the scream and saw Hikari right next to her, just about to slip off of the edge of the platform. She also caught a glimpse of a single arm reaching out through a gap in the crowd.

The edge of the platform was as crowded as a packed train, so Nagisa couldn’t tell who it was, but whoever that arm belonged to pushed Hikari. She was going to fall from the top of the Tower of Captivity.

The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion before Nagisa’s eyes as she had a sudden thought. This girl was loved very much by the onesama she loved—Amane-onesama. She was envied by the other girls, so much that one of them would do something like this to her. Yet she was also loved enough by other girls to be on this platform in the first place. If Hikari failed here, Nagisa had no idea what kinds of things they would say to her...

“You got in the way of Spica’s chance to win!” or “You’re just a burden to Amane-sama.”

Compared to that... They’ve accused me of using “strong-arm tactics” and said I only entered “on the spur of the moment.” But it was Shizuma’s idea in the first place. I don’t seriously think I could become the Étoile. And Shizuma-onesama has already been the Étoile once. And she has really precious memories of a girl who was more beautiful and wonderful than me, and...

Then everything seemed to happen in an instant. Nagisa didn’t know what to think any more. Before she even realized it, she had started to move. She

launched herself into the panicked crowd...and saved Hikari.

But she started to fall instead. Nagisa wasn't concerned about it in the least. She suddenly felt like she wanted to fall.

I wonder how much easier it would be for me if I fell from this stage. If I had never met Shizuma-oneesama, I never would have suffered so much.

Such despair might have been what threw Nagisa off balance.

"Aaaugh!"

When they saw Nagisa about to fall, all the *cadettes* panicked. In a split second, Nagisa had launched herself at Hikari and pushed her toward the center of the Tower, but her momentum had destroyed her balance. She had knocked over the flimsy guardrail and was slipping right off the edge of the platform.

It was obvious that if she fell from that height, even if she wasn't critically injured, she certainly wouldn't come away unhurt. More importantly, Nagisa dangled over a route traveled by horses, and the horses were just about to arrive. If she fell...in the worst-case scenario, she would be trampled before she could escape.

Despite the panic around her, Nagisa managed to hold on to the platform with the tips of her fingers. She smiled weakly at Hikari and said, "Don't worry, it's okay... I'm fine. Unlike the other princesses, I'm strong, so I'll be fine even if I fall from here. Even if I get disqualified for this, I'm sure Shizuma-oneesama won't be angry."

"Oh, no, you mustn't. If you do, then you'll... Your oneesama will be sad, I just know it!" Hikari cried.

As she looked at Hikari, Nagisa remembered how Shizuma's face had stiffened at the second question of yesterday's Mouth of Truth. And how she had turned away from Nagisa and left with her followers.

And then there was that picture she had seen at the library. The words beside the image: "I give all of my love to you."

"No, that would never happen," Nagisa said feebly. "Right about now, I'm

sure Shizuma-oneesama is regretting entering the *Étoile* competition with me.” That was all Nagisa said. She felt weak, like she had a fever.

Just as she was about to intentionally let go of the platform, a gust of wind arrived at the Tower of Captivity.

“Ahh, she’s not going to make it!” and “She’s falling!” rose from the nervous spectators.

From the slope at the base, a horse like a white wind jumped into the air. The mounted Prince reached her hand up to the white princess. Seizing Hikari’s arm, she snatched her off the platform.

Not noticing the situation, Amane just kept going. But from within Amane’s arms, Hikari tried desperately to reach Nagisa, tears in her eyes. She yelled, “Help her, please help her! Please help that girl from Miator! She’s going to fall instead of me.”

When Amane heard Hikari’s screams she looked back and noticed Nagisa about to fall from the edge of the platform. Nagisa was tired, barely hanging onto the edge with one hand.

Amane no longer cared whether she were first to the goal; without a moment’s hesitation, she pulled the reins and turned the horse around. She cantered up the slope again, but at the moment she was about to grab Nagisa from underneath, she heard a sharp yell.

“Idiot! Stop it right now, Amane! Are you trying to take something that belongs to someone else?!”



Trrmp trrrmp trrrmp trrrmp... The galloping got closer.

“Get your hands off her!!”

A black figure leapt into the air, and before Amane could even turn to look, Nagisa’s body was floating.

A sigh rose from the crowd. “Ahhhhh...”

“Stupid girl... You really are stupid, my angel.” Held in Shizuma’s arms, the only thing Nagisa heard was Shizuma’s soft murmur—such a soft voice no one else could hear it. The scent of Shizuma’s body, which was sweaty from riding, enveloped Nagisa.

Before she even knew what was going on, Nagisa had found herself on a horse, saved. The only things she could see were the vast blue sky and a face looking into hers. Half-blinded by the backlighting, Nagisa couldn’t see Shizuma’s face, beautifully fringed by her long, silvery hair.

But she did see a single, shiny teardrop.

No, it might be just sweat...

The release from all the tension was sudden and Nagisa felt overwhelmed. Shizuma squeezed Nagisa tight, and suddenly corrected her body position. The momentum she had needed to save Nagisa had carried her in front of Amane, who had been leading, before she even realized it. She turned around and yelled again.

“You let your guard down, Amane! Now Miator has the win!! My strategy has paid off!”

“Hmph... That’s just like you, Shizuma-sama.” Amane was stunned by how admirable it was for Shizuma to decide to cover for the disgrace committed by a Spica student.

Hikari was the one who was falling first. If Shizuma-sama had said that, people would suspect jealousy from the other Spica students. That Miator cadette saved her—she saved my Hikari. On top of that, Shizuma-sama shifted the blame to herself, to make it seem like this was planned from the beginning.

After a moment, the corners of Amane’s mouth curled into a smile—and

she told Hikari to hold on tight, stood in her stirrups and used both her whip and spurs.

I understand, Shizuma-sama. Now that it comes to this, I will fight seriously too. From now on, I will protect Hikari with my own hands!

The neighing of her horse echoed across the sky. The two of them took one final lap around the grounds in a dead heat. Everyone there held their breath and strained their eyes to see the outcome.

Which one would win?

Amane?

Shizuma?

Spica?

Miator?

Which one would grasp victory?

Chapter 7

The Crown of the Most Beloved Blesses the Two with its Holy Light

A gentle breeze blew across the garden in Maiden Park. Enveloped by the quiet spring sunlight, Shizuma sat next to Nagisa. “Thanks for your hard work. It was a really fun *Étoile* competition, wasn’t it?” Shizuma said.

“Yes. We had just a little bit of trouble, but still...” Nagisa remembered how she had almost fallen off the platform and grinned wryly.

Shizuma looked lovingly at Nagisa. “I’m truly thankful. Thanks to you, I was able to have that much fun again.”

“Not at all—it wasn’t me. You’re such a wonderful person, wonderful things always happen around you. You have such a spectacular school life, yet you chose someone like me...someone like me...”

I can’t let myself get drawn in by Shizuma’s relaxed attitude. I can’t let myself become arrogant. Nagisa hung her head. She smiled, biting her lips the whole time.

“I’m sure I misunderstood a little. I didn’t know anything. I had just transferred in, so I didn’t know anything. I didn’t even know how popular you were at this school. Or that someone like me doesn’t even deserve to be next to you.”

Or that you used to have someone who you loved, and that you made such a perfect couple with her no one could help but admire you...

That was what Nagisa wanted to say more than anything, but she couldn’t say it, and it echoed in her heart.

With a sad expression, Shizuma said, “I don’t know how much you know or what people have told you. I don’t want to know, either. I have a feeling it’s better if I don’t. But I do want to say this.”

She took Nagisa's chin in her hand and made her look into her eyes.

Ahh, she really is an undeniably beautiful goddess, Nagisa thought as she gazed into Shizuma's eyes.

"When it comes to my personal affairs, please believe only what I tell you. I am Hanazono Shizuma. I do not lie."

Nagisa nodded.

"I have memories of days that were like a dream, fun and beautiful, and memories of days that were so painful and sad they tore me apart inside. And together they make up all the wonderful memories that live inside me. Of course, there are some I would rather not remember ever again."

Days that were as fun and beautiful as a dream, and days that were so sad they tore her apart inside—something about those words pricked Nagisa's heart a little.

"Even so, I don't want to deny those memories. I don't want to erase them. Because no matter how bitter they are, they make up a part of the life I've lived. They've made me who I am now—Hanazono Shizuma."

Shizuma looked off into the clear blue sky, her gaze unwavering. Her profile gave off a deep, profound silence.

Nagisa was filled with new feelings toward Shizuma—a little different from the sadness she'd felt since learning about the existence of the girl named Sakuragi Kaori.

Painful memories she doesn't want to ever remember again... I see, Shizuma-oneesama lost someone very...very precious to her.

Nagisa suddenly realized something. *Maybe I've been thinking only about myself all this time. I'm positive Shizuma-oneesama loved Kaori a lot more than she does me. Why would she pick someone like me to take her place? I'm sure she just wants to have fun with me, and I can never replace the one she lost.*

Nagisa felt sorry for herself.

I wonder what it feels like to lose someone you love. No matter how much

you miss her, you'll never be able to see her again. No matter how much you want to hear her voice, you'll never be able to talk to her. No matter how much you want to touch her, you'll never feel her warmth. All that's left are memories that grow hazier and further away as days go by.

Nagisa hadn't lost anyone that important to her yet, but...just imagining it made her body tremble.

Shizuma lives with memories like that—and such painful feelings—inside her.

Shizuma-oneesama...Shizuma-oneesama...waaaaah! I feel so sorry for Shizuma-oneesama!

Nagisa wanted to cry.

Looking at the sky, Shizuma spoke.

“What I love is...right now, this very moment, the one I want to have with all my body and soul is you and only you. The person I've been up until now never had such a feeling before.”

The person she's been up until now... Which means...

A faint sense of expectation arose deep in Nagisa's heart, but she worked desperately to suppress it.

“I don't want to compare people... I don't want to compare the person I was in the past with the person I am now. But there's something I want to tell you. No matter what other people have said.”

Shizuma brought her face close to Nagisa's. “I love you. Even right now, even being together like this right now, I'm afraid that you're going to jump out of my arms and leave. You're the only one who can make me feel so vulnerable.”

Nagisa had a feeling she already knew what was coming next, but...

“May I? Nagisa?”

For some reason, today she was able to relax.

If it can make Shizuma-oneesama happy, even just a little, then...I'll do it. I

can only do a little bit. If that's what Shizuma-oneesama wants, then no matter how much of a mismatch I am, even if people laugh at me, I will stay by Shizuma-oneesama's side. Until the day when Shizuma-oneesama can truly shake off those painful memories...

On top of the bright, lush hill, the two figures became one.

Flower petals fluttered on the spring breeze.

Shizuma lay on the slope of the green hill and gazed at Nagisa's profile as she slept. In the distance, from across the hill, she heard cheers and fanfare.

She murmured softly, "It couldn't be helped this time, because you weren't used to it. But the bond between us is stronger now, so we absolutely must clear the second competition. You'd better prepare yourself."

As she grinned, a yawn came out of nowhere. The brilliant spring sunlight shone down, warming Shizuma's body.

"But, well, this is enough for today." Because I got what I really wanted.

Shizuma turned on her side, stretched her hand toward the bright sky, and closed her eyes. She felt like she could enter Nagisa's dreams.

Epilogue

The Coronation

The main gate to Maiden Park was open wide. A shower of flower petals danced and fluttered from the gate and through the sky. The spring sky, which was once again clear and blue.

A hymn, sung by a chorus of young ladies, echoed across the clear blue sky.

Sacred

Skylark in the sky,

Sacred

White lily in the field.

The Lord's glory fills heaven and earth.

It rains down upon us.

Hosanna

In the highest!

The couple, finished with the ceremony, appeared in front of the church in the middle of the young ladies. Accompanied by thunderous applause and cheers, enough flower petals to bury heaven were scattered through the sky.

"Congratulations."

"Congratulations!"

"Congratulations, holder of the *Petite couronne!*"

In the midst of the congratulations stood a Prince, wearing a jeweled white crown small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, holding hands with a princess who wore a pendant with identical jewels.

The couple gazed into each other's eyes, blushing. And just for today, no

one said anything mean or spiteful to them.

The prince was cheerful; the princess looked shy. Together, they shook hands with some of the audience, then gently placed their cheeks together and gave their best smiles.

They were smiles from the heart, and everyone who saw them broke into a broad smile of her own.

Afterward, a grand party was given by the Spica Student Council. Tea and sweets were passed around.

Thus ended the first contest of the *Étoile* competition, *L'Ouverture brillante*.



Translation Notes ¹ Double bridal wreath: Also known as Reeves' spirea (*Spiraea cantoniensis*). The Japanese name, *kodemari*, means "little hand ball." It has clusters of small white flowers. It is in the rose family.

² The good seed: Shizuma's speech about the "good seed" is a play off the Parable of the Seeds from the Bible, found in Matthew 13. In the original parable, the "seed" is someone who hears the gospel of the Lord, and falling on "the side of the road," on "rocks" or on "good ground" is a metaphor describing that person's reaction to hearing the gospel.

³ Mouth of Truth: In Italian, *La Bocca della Verità*. The sculpted image of a face (perhaps of the sea god Neptune) found in Rome. The mouth of the face is a hole. Legend has it that if one places one's hand in the mouth and tells a lie, one's hand will get bitten off.

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Familiar to many as the creator of *Sister Princess*, a sister moe title that became a sensation in the bishoujo realm. In this series, she writes a pure, traditional yuri story freely drawn from her own experiences in an all-girls school.

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